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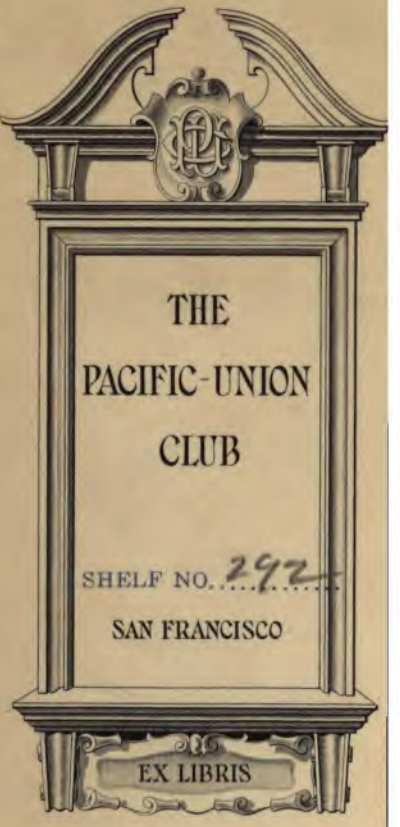

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Princess Napraxine

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PRINCESS NAPRAXINE

BY

OUIDA

A NEW IMPRESSION

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TO

TWO PERFECTLY WISE AND HAPPY PEOPLE

MY DEAR FRIENDS

PIERRE AND EMILIE DE TCHIHATCHEFF

This Story

OF PEOPLE NEITHER HAPPY NOR WISE

IS

Affectionately Dedicated

PRINCESS NAPRAXINE.

CHAPTER I.

A BLUE SEA, some palms with their heads bound up, some hedges of cactus and aloes; some thickets of high rose-laurel, a long marble terrace shining in the sun, huge groups of geraniums not yet frost-bitten, a low white house with green shutters and wooden balconies, a châlet roof and a classical colonnade, these all—together with some entangled shrubberies, an orange orchard, and an olive wood—made up a place which was known on the French Riviera as La Jacquemerille.

What the name had meant originally nobody knew or everybody had forgotten. What La Jacquemerille had been in the beginning of time—whether a woman, a plant, a saint, a ship, a game, a shrine, or only a caprice—was not known even to tradition; but La Jacquemerille the villa was called, as, before it, had been the old windmill which had occupied the site, ere steam and fashion, revolutionising the seashores of Savoy, had caused the present pretty nonsensical, half-rustic, half-classical house to be erected on the tongue of land which ran sharply out into the midst of the blue waves, and commanded a sea view, west and east, as far as the Cape of Antibes on the one side and the Tête du Chien on the other.

It was one of the most coveted spots on the whole seaboard of our modern Capua, and brought a little fortune annually to its happy possessor, a respectable vendor of hams, cheese, and butter in the Cannebière at Marseilles, who for the coming season had pocketed now, from Prince Napraxine, the round little sum of two thousand napoleons.

And the Princess Nadège Napraxine, who had set her heart, or rather her fancy, upon it, was sitting in a bamboo rocking-chair and looking over the house front, and thinking that decidedly she did not like it. It had been an idiotcy to take it, just the sort of folly which her delegate in the affair always committed. They would have been a thousand times better off at the hotels in Nice;

you had no kind of trouble at an hotel, and you could always have your own cooks if you insisted.

For three months it had been the reigning desire of her life to have La Jacquemerille for the winter; it had been let to an American millionnaire, and the apparent impossibility of getting it had naturally increased her anxiety. The American millionnaire had suddenly decided to go home; Jay Gould or Mr. Vanderbilt had done something that had disturbed his digestion, and La Jacquemerille, which she had never seen, but had fallen in love with from photographs, was granted to her wishes for the modest sum of forty thousand francs. She had travelled straight from the Krimea to it without stopping, had arrived by night, and now was looking at it for the first time in broad daylight with a sentiment very near akin to disgust. She did not find it the least like the photographs.

'It is so horridly low!' she exclaimed, after a long and thoughtful examination of the frontage, where an Ionic colonnade sheltered itself under a châlet roof from the Bernese Oberland. 'I am sure it will be most dreadfully cold. And just look at the architecture—every style under heaven! Was there ever such an extraordinary jumble?'

'If it be a jumble, my dear, it is very suitable to our generation; and you are very lucky if, when you buy a pig in a poke, you get nothing worse than a jumble,' said another lady who was sitting opposite to her, with a book held upside down and a litter of newspapers, and who was known in society as Lady Brancepeth.

'Pig in a poke! what is he?' said the Princess Napraxine in her pretty English, which she spoke with scarcely any foreign accent. 'The house is shocking! It is the Parthenon mixed up with a Gasthof. It is a nightmare;—and so small! I don't believe there is room for one quarter of the servants. And just look at these palms with their heads tied up as if they had neuralgia; and I am sure they may well have it, standing still in that *bise*, day and night. I think the whole place utterly odious. I will tell the women to unpack nothing; I am sure I shall not stay a night; an Italian *villino* with a shingle roof and Grindenwald balconies! Can anything be so absurd?'

'I suppose you will wait till the Prince comes downstairs?' said Lady Brancepeth with a little yawn.

'Oh, I don't know; why? He can stay if he likes. Oh, dear! there is a Cairene lattice at that end and these other windows have been copied from the Ca d'Oro, and the roof is as Swiss as if it were a cuckoo clock or a St. Bernard dog. What is one to do?'

'Stay,' suggested Lady Brancepeth. 'People do not die of a Swiss roof unless it tumbles in. The house is all wrong, no doubt, but it is picturesque; a horrible word, you will say, but it describes the place. It *is* picturesque.'

'Wrong things usually are,' said the Princess Napraxine with a sigh, as she surveyed the Greek peristyle, the Swiss shingles, and the slender Ionic colonnade. 'Are all these oranges good for one's complexion, I wonder? It is like sitting in a bright yellow room. I don't like bright yellow rooms. Who said that granted wishes are self-sown curses? Whoever did must have wished to hire La Jacquemerille, and done it. Why do they tie up those palms?'

'To blanch the leaves for Holy Week. Every blade of grass is turned into money on this poetic shore. If the gardens have been included in your agreement you can untie them; if not, you cannot.'

'They will certainly be untied; as for agreement—your brother took the place for us, I dare say he blundered.'

'What were your instructions to him, may I ask?'

'Oh, instructions? I do not remember. I sent him the photographs, and wrote under them: "Take me the house at any price."'

'Curt as Cæsar!'

With a little yawn the Princess Napraxine looked down the long shining sea-wall of white marble, studded at intervals with vases of white marble filled with aloes; beyond the marble wall was the sea—blue, bright, quivering, and full of shifting lights as diamonds are. Then her gaze came inward, and returned to the outline of the house which was so daring and contradictory a jumble. The creepers which covered it glowed red in the December noon; its blue and white awnings were gay and fresh; its vanes were gilded, and pointed merrily to the south; a late rose was garlanding the Cairene lattice; some woodlarks were singing their pretty little roundelay on the boughs of a carob tree; it was all bright, lively, full of colour and of gaiety. Nevertheless, she hardened her heart to it and condemned it utterly, out of mere waywardness.

'I shall go away after breakfast,' she said, as she looked. 'Platon can do as he likes. I shall dine at Nice, and you will come with me.'

'I was sure that was what you would do,' said her friend; 'so was Ralph.'

'Then I shall not do it,' said Princess Napraxine.

She rocked herself soothingly in her chair.

'What a dear little bird that is singing; it cannot be a nightingale in December. The sea looks very much like our Krimean one; and what a lovely air it is. Like an English June without the rain-clouds.'

'Wait till Madame la Bise comes round.'

'Oh, Madame la Bise comes round the corner everywhere. She is like ennui—ubiquitous. You have her in England, only you pretend she is good for your health, and your Kingsley

wrote an ode to her; the rest of the world is not such a hypocrite.'

'Kingsley? He was *Tom Brown*, was he not?'

'You are *Tom Brown*! Really, Wilkes, you know nothing of your own literature.'

'Well, I was never educated as you clever Russians are,' said Lady Brancepeth, good-humouredly; she was sometimes called Socrates, and generally Wilkes by her intimates. She was the ugly member of a singularly handsome family, and the nickname had been given to her in the schoolroom. But her ugliness was a *belle laideur*; her face was charming in its own way, her eyes were brilliant, and her figure was matchless. She was an earl's daughter and an earl's wife, and when she put on the Brancepeth diamonds and showed herself at a State ball, if ugly she was magnificent, even as, if intellectually ignorant, she was a marvel of tact, humour, and discernment.

Her friend and hostess was as entirely unlike her as an orchid is unlike an aloe. She was exquisitely lovely, alike in face and form, and as cultured as a hothouse flower. She was just three-and-twenty years old, and was a woman of the world to her finger tips. She was very cosmopolitan, for though a Russian by birth and marriage her mother had been French, one of her grandmothers English, the other German, and she had been educated by a crowd of governesses of many different nationalities. All her people, whether Russian, English, French, or German, had been very great people, with innumerable and unimpeachable quarterings, for many generations, and to that fact she owed her slender feet, her tiny ears, and her general look of perfect distinction. She had a transparent, colourless skin, like the petals of a narcissus in its perfect *mat* whiteness; she had oriental eyes of a blue-black, which looked immensely large in her delicate face, and which could have great inquisitiveness, penetration, and sarcasm in them, but were usually only lustrous and languid; her mouth was most admirably shaped, and her teeth deserved the trite compliment of the old madrigals, for they were like pearls; she had a very ethereal and delicate appearance, but that delicacy of mould sheathed nerves of steel as a silken scabbard sheathes a damascene blade. She had an infinite grace and an intricate alternation of vivacity and languor which were irresistible. Men were madly in love with her, which sometimes diverted and sometimes bored her; many people were rather afraid of her, and this pleased her much more than anything. She had a capacity for malice.

She now held a sunshade above her head and surveyed the house, and tried to persuade herself it was charming, as her friend had been so sure she would find it detestable. She had wished for the place with an intensity that had almost disturbed her sleep for some weeks, and now she had got it and she hated it. But as they had expected her to do so she was determined to conquer her

hatred and to find it much better than its photographs. The task was not difficult, for La Jacquemerille, if full of absurdities and incongruities, was decidedly pretty.

As she swung herself on her rocking-chair and began to see with the eyes of her mind a hundred improvements which she would instantly have effected whether the terms of the contract allowed of it or not, she saw coming within the range of her unassisted eyesight a large and stately schooner, with canvas white as snow bellying in the breeze. She drew on her long loose tan-coloured glove cheerfully, and said aloud:

'After all, it is better than an hotel. There is no noise, and nobody to stare at one. I dare say we shall get through three months without cutting each other's throats.'

Lady Brancepeth turned and looked out to sea, and saw the schooner, and smiled discreetly; she said as discreetly:

'I am so glad, dear, you won't fret yourself too much about the place; after all, you are not going to live in it for a lifetime; and though, no doubt, it is utterly wrong, and would give Oscar Wilde a sick headache, yet one must confess it is pretty and suits the sunshine.'

The trees had been cut, so that openings in their boughs allowed the sea to be seen from any point of the terrace. Princess Nadine from under her sunshade watched the stately yacht draw nearer and nearer over the shining path of the waters, and drop anchor some half mile off the shore; then she saw a gig lowered, with red-capped white-shirted sailors to man it, and a figure which she recognised descended over the schooner's side into the stern of the boat, which thereupon left the vessel, and was pulled straight towards La Jacquemerille. Neither she nor Lady Brancepeth appeared to notice it; they talked *chiffons*, and read their newspapers; but the long boat came nearer and nearer, until the beat of the oars sounded directly under the walls of La Jacquemerille, and the rowers were too close at hand to be seen. But the Princess Nadine heard the rattle of the oars in the rowlocks, the shock of its keel against the sea-stairs below, which she could not see for the tangle of pyracanthus and mahonia and many another evergreen shrub, covering the space between the terrace and the shore; she heard a step that she knew very well, the sound of which moved her to a slight sense of anticipated amusement, and a stronger sense of approaching weariness, and she turned her head a little, with a gracious if indifferent welcome in her eyes, as a man ran up the stairs at the end of the terrace, and came along the marble floor in the sunshine—a young man, tall, fair, athletic, with a high-bred look and handsome aquiline features.

'You have had a very quick run, surely?' said the Princess Napraxine, stretching out her tan glove.

'Well, we did all we knew, and crammed on every stitch we

had,' the new comer answered, as he kissed the tips of the glove, and murmured in a lower tone, 'Were you not here?'

Then he crossed over to where Lady Brancepeth sat, and kissed her cheek with a brother's indifference.

'Dear Wilkes, are you all right?' he said as he took up a majolica stool and seated himself between them.

'Take that bamboo chair, Geraldine,' asked the Princess. 'That china stool does not suit your long legs at all. How many hours really have you been coming from Genoa? I am fearfully angry with you, by the way; how could you take this place?'

'Because you told me,' answered Lord Geraldine, staring hard. 'What was the command? Take it, *coûte que coûte*. Not an "if"; not a "perhaps"; not a "but." Wilkes, do you not call that too cruel?'

'My dear Ralph,' said Lady Brancepeth, 'any woman's instructions should always be construed so liberally that a margin is left for her at the eleventh hour to change her mind. But do not distress yourself. I do not think Mme. Napraxine really dislikes the place. It is only her way. When she has bought a thing she always finds a flaw in it. It is her habit to condemn everything. She is a pessimist from sheer want of ever having had real disappointment.'

'Look at the house. It speaks for itself,' said the Princess, contemptuously. 'Why did you not telegraph and say that it was a patchwork of every known order of architecture? I would have told you to break off negotiations.'

'But you had seen the photographs.'

'Photographs! Would you know your own mother from a photograph if you had not been told beforehand whose it was?'

'I am so sorry,' murmured Geraldine, as he turned round and gazed at the offending building. 'It is a pretty place, surely? not classical or severe, certainly; but cheery and picturesque. I looked all over it conscientiously, I give you my word, and it is really in very good taste inside; much better than one could have hoped for in a *maison meublée*.'

'Oh, it is Wilkes, not I, who finds it so irretrievably bad,' said the Princess Napraxine, with tranquil mendacity; 'but if it be too bad one can always go to an hotel, only in an hotel one can never sleep at night for the omnibuses, and the banging of other people's luggage, and if I do not sleep I can do nothing. Here I should fancy it is perfectly quiet?'

'Quiet as the grave, unless the sea is howling. But Monte Carlo is just behind that cliff there; with fast horses you can drive over in twenty-six minutes—I timed it by my watch. You can have a score of people to dinner every evening if you like.'

The Princess raised her eyebrows with a gesture signifying that this prospect was not one of unmitigated happiness; and Lady Brancepeth, alleging that the sun was rather too warm for

her north-country bones, went away into the house, being of opinion that three was no company; her brother drew his bamboo chair nearer his hostess, and took the tan glove with the wrist it inclosed in a tender grasp.

'So you do not like the poor place? I am truly grieved!'

She drew her hand away so dexterously that she left the loose empty glove in his fingers, and he looked foolish.

'No; I thought of going away to-morrow,' she continued, without any regard to his dejection; 'I do not like palms that have the toothache, and marble pillars that have married wooden balconies. But your sister, who always opposes me, is so certain I shall go that it is very probable I shall stop.'

'Admirable feminine logic! No doubt the poor house is utterly wrong, though it has been the desire of everybody on the Riviera ever since it was built. I felt sure you would have been more comfortable in a good hotel at Nice, and if I had ventured to volunteer an opinion, I should have said so. Wilkes is quite right; you will be bored to death here.'

'She is quite wrong; she does not like the place herself,' said Princess Napraxine, with decision, while she took back her glove peremptorily. 'I do—at least in a way. The oranges look jaundiced, and the palms rheumatic, but those are trifles. They do say it hailed yesterday, and the water in the washing-basin in the *coupé lit* was frozen last night as we came into Ventimiglia; but I saw a scorpion on the wall this morning, and heard a mosquito, so I am convinced it is the south of the poets, and am prepared for any quantity of proper impressions, only they are slow in coming to me; it is so excessively like the Krimea, terrace and all. Should not you go in and see if Platon be awake?'

'I am convinced he is asleep. It is not quite one o'clock, and you arrived in the night, didn't you?'

'Yes; but he will get up, because he will want to be off to Monte Carlo. He will spend his life there and send over expresses every hour for fresh rouleaux. When he is near a gaming-table he is so happy.'

'Enviable faculty!'

'It is my faculty too. But I try against it; he doesn't. Men never try to resist anything.'

Geraldine murmured words to the effect that his life was one long compulsory resistance, and his eyes completed the uncomplete sentences.

'Don't talk nonsense,' said his hostess. 'You know I do not like *madrigaux*; and an Englishman always looks so clumsy when he is making them. Make me a cigarette instead.'

'Always cruel!' murmured her companion, obediently rolling up Turkish tobacco.

'Always kind,' said the Princess. 'People who are kind to men and children never spoil them. Where will your schooner

stay? There is no dock, or quay, or whatever you call it, here. These places always ought to have one of their own.'

'How can they when the rocks go sheer down into deep water? No, I must keep her off Villefranche or Monaco. She can be round in half an hour—at your disposition, of course, like her owner.'

'If she be not more manageable than her owner——'

'Oh, Nadine! When I only live to obey your orders, and never even receive a smile in return!'

'Ah, if you want reward there is no longer any merit! And do not call me by my name in that manner; you will do it some day before Platon.'

'He doesn't mind.'

'No, of course he does not mind; but I do, which is more to the purpose.'

'You are very unkind to-day, princess. This unhappy Jacquemerille! it is grievous that you don't like it; the gardens are really pretty, and the view is superb.'

'You talk like an auctioneer; go and find the gardener and tell him to untie those palms.'

'Pray don't send me away yet.'

'Is that what you call your docility?'

His hand stole towards hers again.

'Do tell me, princess,' he murmured timidly. 'You will stay now that you are here, will you not?'

'How can I answer for the duration of my fancies? Perhaps I may, if you amuse me well enough.'

'I would rather interest you.'

'Ah, my friend, that is quite impossible. Even to be amused is hard enough, when one is not in the humour. When one is in the humour, it is even fun to go out fishing; when one is not, one is dull even at a masked ball at Petersburg. We are like the cuttle-fish, we make our sphere muddy with our own dulness. How would you suggest that I should find any interest here? There will be no society except some gouty statesmen and some sickly women, a few yachtsmen, a pigeon-shooter or two, and quantities of people one cannot know.'

'There will be heaps of people who know you,' said Geraldine, almost with a groan; 'at least, if you deign to allow them the *entrée* of La Jacquemerille. If I might presume to advise, the place is all to itself, they cannot come if you do not invite them. It is as nearly simple nature here as a *mondaine* and an *élégante* like you can ever bring herself to go. You have the sea at your feet and the mountains at your back; you can have absolute repose and leisure unless you wilfully bring a horde of men and women from Nice and Monaco. You are so clever; you might make endless sketches. If I were you, I should make it the occasion to get away from the world a little; if the world you must

have, I should take it in the Avenue Josephine instead of at La Jacquemerille.'

The Princess laughed languidly, and looked at her cigarette.

'You want a solitude *à deux*, I dare say! But you see there are Platon and Wilkes against that, not to mention my own inclinations.'

'Pray, be serious.'

'Why? When one is in the mood to be serious, one does not take a nondescript toy within five miles of Nice. I dare say you are right; a quiet life for a little while would be very wholesome, it would certainly be a novelty, but it would be beyond me. I am not a stupid woman, I am not a silly woman certainly; no, I am quite convinced I have a brain, though as for a soul, I don't know, and I am afraid I don't very much care. A brain, however, I have; Wilkes is even unkind enough to call me learned. But still, my dear Ralph, I am, as you observed, that much-abused animal, a *mondaine*. When once we belong to the world can we ever get rid of the world? *Jamais! au grand jamais!* If we try to drink spring water, we put it somehow or other in a liqueur glass. If we smell at a hedge-rose, somehow or other Piver has got in it before us, and given it the scent of a sachet.'

'You are very witty, but——'

'I don't care in the least for "buts," and I have no pretensions to wit; I leave wit and whist to the dowagers. No; when we are once of the world worldly, we never get rid of the world again. It is our old man of the sea pickaback with us for ever? Who can lead a meditative life that dines twice a day, as we all practically do, and eats of twenty services? When we prattle about nature, and quote Matthew Arnold, we are as artificial as the ribboned shepherdesses of Trianon; and what we call our high art is only just another sort of jargon. Suppose I followed your recipe and tried living quietly here, which means asking nobody to dinner, what would happen? Wilkes would go away, Platon would sulk or do worse, and you and I should yawn in each other's faces. It is not that I have no brain, I have even a soul—if anybody has—but I began the other way, you know. It is like taking chloral; if once you do it you cannot leave off. Society is entirely like chloral; it gives you pleasant titillations at first and just the same *morne* depression afterwards, and yet you cannot do without it.'

'I hope you do without chloral; wait another twenty years at any rate before you poison yourself.'

'Twenty years! I wonder what we shall be like by then? I dare say I shall be an incurable hypochondriac, and you will have several tall boys at Eton. Perhaps your son will be falling in love with my daughter, and you and I shall be quarrelling about the settlements.'

'Nadine!'

He drew his chair very near indeed, and looked straight into

her eyes. The Princess looked up at the blue sky, serenely indifferent.

'That is all nonsense, you know,' she said, with a little affected asperity, but she smiled even if she felt more inclined to yawn. At that moment there issued from one of the many glass doors of the nondescript house her husband, Platon Nicholaivitch Napraxine.

'My dear Ralph, I am very glad to see you,' he said cordially, in the tongue of the boulevards, which every gently born Russian has taken as his own. 'You came round in your "tub," as you call her? You have found the Princess dissatisfied with the house? She is always dissatisfied with everything, alas! The house is well enough; the bathrooms are small, and there is no billiard-room; but otherwise I see no defect. Breakfast is waiting and Lady Brancepeth also. Will you come?'

His wife rose languidly, and taking the arm of Lord Geraldine, drew her skirts of India muslin, Flemish lace, and primrose satin over the marble pavement of the terrace to the house. Prince Napraxine stood a moment with his cigar in his mouth, looking south and east over the sparkling sea, then, with his hands in his pockets, sauntered also towards the house.

He was a tall, loosely-built man, with an ugly and frankly Kalmuck face, redeemed by an expression of extreme good humour; he was about thirty years of age, and had the air of a person who had always done what he chose, and had always been obeyed when he spoke; but this air changed curiously whenever he looked at his wife; he had then the timid and almost supplicating expression of a big dog, anxious to please, but afraid to offend.

'Let us go and eat Milo's red mullets,' she said now.

'Milo? Is that the cook? Can he do a *bouillabaisse*, I wonder?' he replied.

Their *chef* had been taken ill, as the train had touched Bordighera, and their agent had hastily supplied his place so far as it is ever possible to supply that of a great and almost perfect creature experienced in all the peculiarities and caprices in taste of those to whom his art is consecrated.

The Princess took no notice of her lord's blunder; indeed, she seldom answered his remarks at any time; she drew her primrose satin and soft muslin over the sill of the French window, and seated herself at an oval table, gay with fine china, with flowers and fruit, and with a Venice point lace border to its table cloth, which was strewn with Parma violets and the petals of orange-blossoms. She had Geraldine on her right hand and her back to the light. She had an ermine bag holding a silver globe of warm water for her feet, and a chair that was the perfection of ease. The dining-room was small, but very pretty, with game and autumn flowers painted on its panels, and shutters, with hangings

of olive velvet and cornices of dead gold, and on the ceiling a hunting scene of Fontainebleau *à la* Henri IV.

She began to think seriously that after all La Jacquemerille would do very well for the winter. It was utterly absurd, to be sure, outside, but it was comfortable within; and, indeed, had considerable taste displayed in it, the American having wisely mistrusted his own tendencies and left the whole arrangement to French artists, who had robbed him ruthlessly, but who had made each of his apartments as perfect in its way as a Karl Theodor plate.

'I think I shall buy it,' said the Princess to her companions; indifferent to her own inconsistencies.

'Wait a little,' said Lady Brancepeth. 'Don't rush from hatred to adoration. There may be all sorts of things the matter with the drains. The *calorifères* may be wrong. The cellars may be damp. The windows may rattle. The kitchens may be too far or too near. At the end of the winter you will know all its defects and all its virtues. Houses are like friendships, there is hardly one in a thousand worth a long lease.'

'Wilkes is always cynical,' said her brother.

'And nobody is a stauncher friend,' said the Princess. 'Why will she make herself out a cynic?'

'A cynic? Because I am prudent?' said Lady Brancepeth. 'If you sigh all the winter because the house is not yours you will enjoy it. If you buy it you will discover that it is uninhabitable at once.'

'Nadine is never long pleased,' said her husband.

'What does Matthew Arnold say?' answered the Princess, 'that the poet is never happy, because in nature he wants the world, and in the world he longs for nature. Now, I am not a poet, but still I am a little like that. What you are pleased to call my discontent is a certain restless sensation that our life—which we think the only life—is a very ridiculous one; and yet I am quite incapable of leading any other—for more than a week. I remember, Geraldine, that you remarked once that it was this fool of a world which makes fools of us all. There was a profound truth in the not very elegant speech.'

'I don't remember saying it; but it is certainly true. We grow up in the world as a Chinese child grows up in the jar which is to make a dwarf of him. The jar checks our development *malgré nous*. We cannot be giants, if we would.'

'I am sure it would not suit you to be a giant, Ralph,' said his sister. 'You would never like to release distressed damsels and slay disagreeable dragons. The uttermost you would ever do to the very biggest dragon would be to turn an epigram on his odd appearance. Giants are always very busy people, and you are so lazy——'

'That is the fault of the jar,' said Geraldine.

'Some people break the jar and get out of it,' said his sister.

'No, nobody does,' said the Princess Napraxine. 'You mistake there, Wilkes. The world is with us always, and we cannot get rid of it.'

The frank eyes of Geraldine conveyed to her eloquently his conviction that the discontent she spoke of was solely due to her determined banishment of one sentiment out of her life. She gave him an enigmatical little smile of comprehension and disbelief combined, and continued to unroll her philosophies—or what did duty as such.

'Do you not know the kind of feeling I mean? When we are among the orchids in the conservatories we want to go and gather damp primroses. Do you not remember that queen who, when she heard the gipsies singing under her windows, all in a moment longed to go with them? There is something of the gipsy in everybody—in everybody who has a soul. The time comes when one is tired of the trumpery and folly of it all—the wicked expenditure, the dense selfishness and indifference, the people that call themselves leaders of good taste, and yet like *foie gras* and the *Concours hippique* and *Kümmel* and *Londrès*, and the atmosphere of Paris theatres.'

'Interesting, but discursive,' murmured Lady Brancepeth. 'Primroses—gipsies—a soul—I do not see the connection.'

'You know what I mean,' said her hostess, who always expected to be understood. 'Our life is silly, it is tiresome, it is entirely selfish, it is even, in a way, monstrous; and yet we cannot live any other. We are dominated by the Frankenstein of pleasure which we have been pleased to create. When we wish to get away we cannot; we are like the queen at the palace windows—we would fain go to the greenwood, and the brook, and the fresh winds, but we cannot, because we are fastened in our gilded chair; there is always our household to shut the window and send the gipsies away. Do we ever get rid of the household, of the *galerie*, of the routine, of the infinite ennui? I am only twenty-three years old, as you all know, and I feel as if I had lived fifty years. Why? Because it is all over-full, tiresome, high-pressure; and the worst of it is that I could lead no other life if I tried!'

'I am not sure of that,' said Lady Brancepeth. 'Marie Antoinette would never have believed that she could mend clothes and darn stockings had not the days of darkness come. In those days it was just the dainty perfumed *mignonnes* like you, my dear, who were the bravest and handiest in bearing their troubles and earning their bread.'

'One never knows till one is tried,' said Princess Nadine. 'If they would begin to guillotine us I dare say we should know how to behave; dynamite doesn't do much for us. When one goes into the air without warning in little bits, in company with the plaster of the ceiling, or the skin of the carriage horses, or the

stuffing of the railway carriage, there is not much room for heroism.'

'I am not sure there is no heroism,' said Geraldine. 'The certainty of the guillotine must have been much easier to bear than the uncertainty in which you all dwell in Russia—the perpetual spectre always behind your chairs, beside your pillows, under the roses in your gardens——'

'Oh, my dear Geraldine, is not death with us always everywhere? May we not kill ourselves every moment we walk downstairs, or eat a mullet like this, or start on a journey, or read a book by a night-lamp? You all wonder how Russians can exist with assassination always keeping step with them, but in reality is it so much worse than the way in which all humanity loves and laughs, and toils and moils, and makes leases for ninety-nine years, and contracts foreign loans for payment in a century, with death hanging over the whole thing ready to swoop down at any minute? If the world realised it of course it would go mad *en masse*, but it doesn't realise it though hundreds of people die every second.'

'Did Nadine ever tell you what she did last year?' said Prince Napraxine. 'She saw by chance a queer-looking can which had been placed by some of those miscreants in a niche of the garden wall of our house in Petersburg; the thing looked suspicious to her, and it had a coil of tubing attached to it. She took the whole affair up and dropped it into the fountain. She forgot to mention it till the next morning. Then when we fished it out, and the chemists reported on it, it appeared that the can was really full of nitro-glycerine as she had fancied. I think that was quite as courageous as going to the guillotine.'

'Oh, no, my dear Platon!' said his wife, with some annoyance. 'Nothing you have no time to think about is really courageous. The can was suspicious and the children were playing near it, so I thought the fountain was the safest place; it *might* have been only milk, you know. Pray do not let us attempt to compete with those people of '89. We shall fail dismally.'

Geraldine looked up with a startled apprehension in his eyes.

'Good heavens, do you mean it? Has she actually been—been—in such awful danger as that, and never told me?'

'We were all in the same danger,' said Prince Napraxine, a little drily; 'but the Princess alone had the *beau rôle* out of it.'

'Who put the can there?'

'Oh, how should I know. The police never traced it. I do not suppose it was any special design against us as individuals; only as items of a detested whole. And two of the Grand Dukes were coming to breakfast with us that day.'

'What a fuss about an ugly little tin can!' said his wife. 'The really courageous person must have been the person who brought it there; misguided, perhaps, but certainly courageous. To drive through a city in a droschky embracing certain annihila-

tion, in the form of a little tin pot held on your knee, is a combination of absolute awfulness and grotesque bathos, which must try all one's nerves without any compensating sense of grandeur in it. A jolt of the wheel over a stone and away you fly into the air, a blurred nothing in a stream of blood and dust! No! I respect the Nihilists when I think of all they risk for a purely abstract idea without any sort of personal hope or triumph.'

'They have hatred,' said Lady Brancepeth; 'I think you forget what an invigorating, self-sustaining, all-compensating sentiment that is. Its ecstasy is its own reward. You underrate, too, the immense fascination of the power to destroy; *on se grise* with that sense of holding the annihilation of a whole community in their hands. What made the Roman Emperors mad—the unlimited power of destruction—now intoxicates the mechanic or the clerk who has the task of planting a can of nitro-glycerine. When statesmen, and even philosophers, theorise about human nature and all its disorders, they never give weight enough to the tremendous attraction which pure destruction alone exercises over so many minds.'

'But they have love, too; love of the poor and of a lofty ideal,' said the Princess. 'Myself, I forgive their little tin cans, though they are extremely unpleasant, when I think of their impersonal devotion. All I wish is, that their warfare was not conducted by tin cans; the thing has a ludicrous, comical, vulgar side; death dropped in a little box labelled "Glass, with care"! There is no dignity in it, no grace. Pallida Mors should not crouch under a cab-cushion!'

'How can you make a jest——' began Prince Napraxine. She interrupted him:

'I am not in the least jesting, I am entirely in earnest. I do not like being made war on by chemists; I do not like annihilation left in a paper parcel; it makes one feel absurd, fate seems trifling with one. A Jacquerie hewing at one with their scythes one would know what to do with, but who can extract any Sophoclean tragedy from a Thanatus that looks exactly like a box of sardines or a pot of *foie gras*? It is not the war that I object to, it is the form it takes; and our great, grim, ghostly Russia should evolve out of her soul of ice something much more in consonance with her. Beside the burning of Moscow, the little tin cans and the burrowing like moles underground are commonplace and a little vulgar. Russia is so awful in herself. One thinks of the frozen world of the Inferno, and Dante and Virgil walking in the spectral silence; and then, after all, in hard fact there is nothing but the police, and the drunken moujik, and the man who carries his nitro-glycerine as a baker's boy carries his rolls of bread! It is bathos.'

'One never knows what you mean, Nadine,' murmured her

husband. 'If you talk so at Petersburg they will think you are a Nihilist at heart.'

'I imagine half the *noblesse* are,' said the Princess. 'The *noblesse* have always dug their own graves before all revolutions everywhere. They call it "going with the times." They did it in France, they are now doing it in England, they are doing it (more secretly) in Russia. No one should forsake their order; it is a kind of desertion, like that of a soldier who runs away before the enemy. That is why I like the party obedience of your country, Wilkes; it is entirely unintelligent and profoundly immoral; to a generally intellectual nation it would be impossible, but it is loyal. I think when one has to choose between a crime and a disloyalty one must take the crime as the lesser evil of the two.'

'Voting for party is a crime very often,' said Geraldine. 'It is one of the many things as to which I have never made up my mind. Ought one to sacrifice the country to what one believes a bad measure for the sheer sake of keeping one's party in office? Surely not.'

'You solve your doubts by having no party, and never going into the Lords.'

'At least I can do no mischief.'

'Are you certain of that?' said his sister. 'I think you place voting for party on too low a plane. If we believe, generally, that one party—say it is Conservative, say it is Liberal—is necessary to the preservation or the progress of the nation, then I think we are bound to do our best to keep it at the helm of the vessel of the nation, even if in certain minor matters we are not always in accord with the course it takes.'

'Admirably reasoned; but are not politicians always as great sophists as priests?'

'Sophists! always that cruel charge,' said a mellow and manly voice, as there entered the dining-room a person of handsome and stately presence, in a picturesque costume, with knee breeches and buckled shoes, whom the servant announced as Monsignore Melville. He was welcomed by all with cordiality and delight, and the Princess bade him draw his chair beside her, though he alleged that he had breakfasted.

'I came to see if you had arrived,' he said, as he seated himself. 'Princess, I hope La Jacquemerille is fortunate enough to please you?'

'I have been abusing it; it is a very ridiculous house, but it grows upon one; and if you will come often enough, Monsignore —— No, I never make compliments. You know you are a delightful companion, and of how many people can one say that?'

Monsignore Melville bowed low.

'You are too enchantingly kind. But all are not so kind.

Lord Geraldine was accusing priests of sophism. What was he saying?'

'He was saying that politicians are the sophists, and Wilkes the head of them.'

'Because I defended "voting straight,"' said Lady Brancepeth. 'Is it not the very root and essence of English constitutional life? Monsignore Melville, who is an Englishman, will, I am sure, say so.'

'To serve the Church is only a superior kind of voting with party,' said Geraldine.

'Do not be profane, Ralph,' said his sister. 'It does not suit you. You were created with a reverential nature, and you have endeavoured to ruin it, as most men always do try to destroy what is best in them. Monsignore, answer me, is it not the highest morality to vote straight?'

'That is a very unlimited laudation, Lady Brancepeth,' returned Melville, with a charming smile. 'I should be scarcely prepared to go so far, though I am aware that there is no salvation outside such morality in the political creed of our country.'

'Ecclesiastics have no country, my dear Monsignore,' said the Princess Napraxine, 'except a heavenly one. What a comfort that must be! Platon is always being worried to return to the *mater patria*, and his conscience is so peculiarly constituted that it will never allow him to admit how intensely he hates it. As if life were not tiresome enough in itself, without everyone being burdened with the obligation to like, or pretend that they like, their country, their relatives, their children, and their church!——

Napraxine looked distressed:

'You have liked Russia, too, sometimes,' he said wistfully; 'and poor little Sachs and Mitz!'

His wife cast upon him a glance of sovereign disdain: 'There are only two things I like in Russia, they are the steppes and the wolves: that limitless expanse, stretching away to the dim grey sky on every side, and the sight of a pack of the gaunt grey beasts on the snow as one's sledge flies by; those two things give one a sensation which one does not get elsewhere. But it is monotonous, it soon ceases to move one: the wolves never attack, and the great, awful, white plain never leads to anything better than the posting-house, the samavàr, and the vodki, and the group of drunken coachmen.'

'The human interest, in a word,' suggested Melville.

Madame Napraxine smiled:

'Ah! my dear Monsignore, the human interest is quite as dull as the steppe and quite as ravenous as the wolf! How delightful it must be to be a priest to see all that raw material through rose-glasses!'

'May not the interest be in subduing the wolf?' murmured Melville. 'And even the steppe, under the fostering touch of

May dews and June sunlight, will put forth blossoms. Is there no allegory there that Madame Napraxine will deign to accept?'

'You always say pretty things, in the pulpit or out of it,' she replied; 'but you cannot lend me your rose-glasses to see them through, so I fear they do not convince me. The astronomers who are now busy seeing canals in the planet Mars, would see nothing if they had not their glasses; no more would you. You see a soul in a drunken *dvornik*; that is quite as astonishing, and probably quite as imaginary, as the network of canals in Mars. Will you really eat nothing, Monsignore? Let us go out and sit under that awning there; a bath of sunshine always does one good, and you need not grudge yourself a half hour of leisure. I have no doubt you have been passing the forenoon somewhere with cholera or typhus, or some other plague of this sanitary century. You know, Geraldine, that is Monsignore's way. He is S. Francis Xavier all the morning, and then turns himself inside out and becomes an Abbé *galant* for society.'

'I have not been to anything typhoid or choleraic this morning, or I should not be here to endanger your loveliness, Princess,' answered Melville. 'I have been where Poverty is—alas! where is she not?—and in our day those who wed with her regard it as a forced marriage, wholly joyless; and we cannot persuade them that there may be graciousness where she dwells if only cleanliness and content will sit down with her.'

'Oh, Monsignore, it is not only poverty that scares content, I can assure you,' said Madame Napraxine.

'If you be not content, who should be?' murmured Melville. 'With every possible gift of nature, culture, fate, and fortune showered upon you, why will you always persuade yourself, Princess, that your doubled rose-leaf mars everything? I do not believe the rose-leaf even exists!'

'I am not sure that it does, either,' replied Madame Napraxine; 'but I never remember to have felt contented in my life. Is content an intellectual quality? I doubt it. Perhaps it is a virtue; I dislike virtues.'

Melville was a sincerely pious Churchman, but even he did not dare to take up the cudgels in honour of poor virtue before this merciless speaker. He was satisfied with replying that content was not a quality which the tendencies of the waning nineteenth century were likely to foster.

'No!' said the Princess Napraxine. 'The note of our time is restlessness, and its chief attainment the increase of insanity.'

'If it did not sound too much like moralising, I should say that there was never any time in which there was so much self-indulgence and so little real rest,' said Melville, who had the sensitive fear of a man of the world of appearing to obtrude his own convictions, and to preach out of season and out of church.

'People require to have their brains and their consciences very

clear and very calm to enjoy rest. It is the reward which nature reserves for her good children,' said Lady Brancepeth.

'I must be very good, then,' said Madame Napraxine with her little mysterious smile, 'for I rest absolutely. To know how to do nothing is a great secret of health and of comfort; but you must not wait till you are fatigued to do nothing, or you cannot enjoy it.'

'And I suppose you must occasionally be deaf to duty knocking at the door?'

'Duty! She should have her proper moments of audience, like the steward, the piqueur, the secretary, and other necessary and disagreeable people; that is to say, if she really exist. Monsignore Melville evidently is in the habit of listening to her.'

'I may say with Josef II., "C'est mon métier à moi,"' said Melville, with good humour. 'But believe me, Princess, it is not duty which prevents repose; it is far more often worry, the hateful familiar of all modern life. Worry takes a million forms; very often it is dressed up as pleasure, and perhaps in that shape is more distressing than in any other.'

'Yes, the age has invented nothing that does not result in worry. Only look at the torture to diplomatists from the telegrams,' replied Madame Napraxine, while she tendered him a cigar. 'In other years an ambassador had some pleasure in disentangling a delicate and intricate embroglio, some chance of making a great name by his skill in negotiation. An able man was let alone to mingle his *suaviter* and his *fortiter*, his honey and his aloes, as he thought fit; his knowledge of the country to which he was accredited was trusted to and appreciated; nowadays, telegrams rain in on him with every hour; he is allowed no initiative, no independent action; he is dictated to and interfered with by his home government, and cypher messages torture him at every step. What is the consequence? That there is scarcely a diplomatist left in Europe—they are only delegates. Where there is one, he is incessantly controlled, hindered, and annoyed, and all his counsels are disregarded. Meanwhile the world's only kind of peace is a permanent armed truce. But let us go into the garden.'

CHAPTER II.

When Nadège Fedorevna, Countess Platoff, known to all her friends by the *petit nom* of Nadine, had reached her sixteenth year she had the look of a hothouse gardenia, so white was her skin and so spiritual her aspect, whilst her slender form had all the grace of a flower balancing itself on a fragile stalk in a south wind. That ethereality, that exquisite delicacy, as of something far too

fair and evanescent for man's rude touch, fascinated into a timid and adoring passion a heavily-built and clumsy cuirassier of the Imperial Guard, who was also one of the greatest nobles written in the Velvet Book of Russia—Platon Nicholaivitch, head of the mighty family of Napraxine. He was eight-and-twenty years old, immeasurably rich, popular with his sovereign, a good soldier, and an exceedingly amiable man. He laid his heart and everything he possessed at the feet of this exquisite and disdainful child when he saw her at her father's embassy in Vienna one fateful April day.

She refused him without a moment of doubt; but he was persevering, greatly enamoured, and had both her parents upon his side. She was neither weak, nor very obedient; yet in time she allowed herself to be persuaded that not to accept such an alliance would be to do something supremely ridiculous. She resisted stubbornly for a while; but she was inquisitive, independent, and a little heartless.

Her mother, a woman of the world, full of tact and of wisdom, answered her objection that the Prince Napraxine was stupid, had a Kalmuck face, and was inclined to be corpulent—in a word, displeased her taste in every way—by frankly admitting these objections to be incontestable facts, but added, with persuasive equanimity, 'All you say is quite true, my child, but that sort of detail does not matter, I assure you, in a question of the kind we are discussing. It would matter terribly to him if you were stupid or ugly, or inclined to be fat; but in a man—in a husband—in three months' time you will not even observe it. Indeed, in a fortnight you will be so used to him that you will not think whether he is handsome or ugly. Familiarity is a magician that is cruel to beauty, but kind to ugliness. As for being inclined to corpulence, he is very tall, he will carry it off very well; and as to gambling, he will never get to the bottom of his salt mines and ruby mines: that is the chief question. And after all, my dear Nadine, a man who will never interfere with you and never quarrel with you is a pearl seldom found amongst the husks; and when the pearl is set in gold—— I would not for worlds persuade you, my dear, to marry merely for certain worldly considerations, such as the great place and the great wealth of Platon Nicholaivitch; but I would earnestly advise you to marry early and to marry for peace, and when peace and a colossal fortune are to be found united, it seems to me a great mistake to throw them both away. Somebody else will take them. I suppose you dream of love as all young girls do; but——'

'Not at all: I know this is only a question of marriage,' said Nadine, with that terrible sarcasm on her lovely young lips with which many things she had seen in her mother's house had armed her for the battle of life whilst she was still but a child.

She did not think about love at all; she was not romantic;

she already thought it *vieux jeu*; but she had a brain above the average, and she fancied that she should like the man to whom she was given to be something great in intellectual power, not merely in the sense of millions and of rank. But a girl of sixteen, born and bred in an embassy, reared in the most brilliant cities of the world, having seen the great panorama of society pass before her eyes from her babyhood, is, however innocent in other ways, not unsophisticated enough to ignore the vast advantages of such a position and such wealth as the Prince Napraxine offered to her. Besides, her father wished passionately for the acceptance of Napraxine; he himself was deeply in debt, and knew that his constitution had the germs of a mortal disease.

'V'là, ma petite,' he said to her gravely one morning, 'je suis criblé de dettes: je peux mourir demain. C'est mieux que tu le prennes—— enfin, c'est un assez bon garçon.'

It was not an enthusiastic eulogy of his desired son-in-law, but he never spoke enthusiastically, and his child knew very well that under the negligent slight phrases there ran a keen and vivid desire, perhaps even a carking and unacknowledged care. By the end of that evening she had allowed herself to be persuaded, and in three months' time was married to Prince Napraxine, not knowing in the least what marriage was, but only regarding it as an entry into the world with unlimited jewels and the power of going to any theatres she chose. When she did know what it was, it filled her with an inexpressible disgust and melancholy. She was very young, and her temperament was composed of that mingled hauteur and spirituality in which the senses sleep silent long, sometimes for ever.

She bore two sons in the first two years of her marriage, and then considered herself free from further obligations to provide heirs for the vast Napraxine properties. Her husband had been ardently but timidly in love; when she intimated to him that their union should be restricted to going to Courts together and being seen in the same houses at discreet intervals, he suffered in his affections as well as in his pride, but he did not dare to rebel.

This lovely young woman, who was like a gardenia or a narcissus, who was not nineteen, and declared that all the caresses and obligations of love were odious to her, could strike terror and submission into the soul of the big Platon Napraxine, who stood six feet three inches, and had been no unheroic soldier in the frosty Caucasus and on the banks of Euphrates and Indus. She was unusually clever, clever by nature and culture, by intellect and insight, keenly, delicately clever, with both aptitude and appetite for learning and scholarship; and within the first twenty-four hours of her marriage, she had taken his measurement, moral and mental, with merciless accuracy, and had decided to herself that she would never do but what she chose. He was a big dog, a *bon enfant*, a good-natured, good-tempered cipher, but he was a

great bore. And she put him aside out of her life altogether, except inasmuch as it was absolutely necessary to sit sometimes at the same table with him, and have his orders blaze beside her diamonds at State balls; and the friends of the Prince Napraxine envied her, of all her valuable possessions, none so much as that of her husband, whose revenues were inexhaustible, and whose good-nature and patience were equally endless.

Looking back to her seventeenth year she always admitted that her mother had judged rightly.

'Poor Platon!' she would say to herself sometimes when she thought so, with a little passing flicker of something like compunction. What had she given him in return for his great name, his enormous wealth, his magnificent gifts of all kinds, his honest devotion, and his infinite docility? Being very honest, when in self-communion of this sort, she was obliged to confess to herself —nothing. Her own money was all settled on herself; their rank had been quite equal; there were hundreds as pretty as herself, and she could not now recollect that in six years of marriage she had given him one affectionate word.

'The fault is not ours,' she would say; 'it is the institution that is so stupid. People do not know how else to manage about property, and so they invented the marriage state. But it is an altogether illogical idea, binding down two strangers side by side for ever, and it cannot be said to work well. It keeps property together, that is all; so I suppose it is good for the world; but certainly individuals suffer for it more than perhaps property is worth.'

Her two little boys were always left in the Krimea with the mother of Napraxine; they were much better there, she thought, growing up robust and healthy like two young bear cubs (which, to her eyes, they much resembled) in the pure breezes from the Black Sea. When she did see them she was always amiable to them, even thought she felt fond of them, as she did of the steppes and the wolves; but like the steppes and the wolves they were certainly most interesting in theory and at a good long distance. They were too like their father to be welcome to her. 'They have the Tartar face, and they will be just as big and just as stupid,' she thought, whenever she saw them.

When Melville, who had been long intimate with her family, told her, as he very often did, that it was her duty to have the children near her, and to interest herself in their education, she always replied: 'They are exactly like Platon; nothing I could do would make them different. They are perfectly well cared for by his mother, and brought up much better than I could do it. I was expected to give him an heir: I have given him two heirs. I do not see that anything more is required of me.'

And when Melville would fain have insisted on the usual arguments as to the obligations of maternity and education, she

invariably interrupted him, and once said at full length, 'If the children were mine only and not Platon's, I could make something of them. But they are formed in his image; exceedingly good, entirely uninteresting. They will be Princes Napraxine, and so the world will adore them, though they be as stupid as mules and as ugly as hedgehogs. They do not interest me. Oh, you are shocked! Even you, the most original of Churchmen, cannot get over your prejudices. Believe me, *la voix de la Nature* does not speak to everybody. It does not say anything at all to me.'

'I will be an honest woman; it is much more *chic*,' she had said to herself in the first year of her marriage in the height of a Paris winter, as she had looked around her on society, with her brilliant indolent eyes, which saw so clearly and so far, and surveyed and appraised her contemporaries.

It would be eccentric, but distinguished. To her delicate, satirical, fastidious taste, there was a sort of vulgarity in being compromised. She did not go farther than that, or higher than that. The thing was common, was low; that was quite enough against it. Something that was half spirituality, half hauteur, made the decision easy to her. A certain chillness of temper aiding, her resolve had been kept. She had been as loyal a wife to Prince Napraxine as though she had loved him. Men did not obtain any hold on her. She flirted desperately sometimes, amused herself always, but that was all. When they tried to pass from courtiers into lovers, they found a barrier, impalpable but impassable, compounded of her indifference and her raillery, ever set between her and them. She fancied that it would be quite intolerable to her for any living being to believe himself necessary to her happiness; besides she did not much believe in happiness. The world was pleasant enough; like a well-cushioned saloon-carriage on a well-ordered line of rail; nothing more. You travelled onward, *malgré vous*, and you slept comfortably, and your ultimate destination you could not avoid; but if you escaped any great disaster by the way, and if nobody woke you with a shock, it was all you wanted. She did not believe in the possibility of any great beatitude coming to you on that very monotonous route.

She had that admirable tact coupled with that refined but unsparing insolence which daunts the world in general to silence and respect. The greatest *blagueur* on the Boulevards never dared to hint at a weakness or a concession on the part of the Princess Napraxine. And women, though they envied her bitterly, reviled her unsparingly, and shivered under the sting of her delicate impertinence or her pregnant epigram, yet were perfectly conscious that she had never shared their follies. Passion had as yet no place in her complex and delicate organism. She could not, or would not, understand why passion should not be content to amuse and worship her, just as a furnace fire may only bake a porcelain cup or call to life a gardenia blossom.

Now and then this refusal of hers to comprehend what she inspired ended in dire tragedy. Now and then some one killed himself because she had laughed. Now and then two people were silly enough to fight a duel about a glove she had dropped, or the right to take her down the stairs at the opera. But this was always lamentable and foolish in her sight; only its consequences, though she regretted them, did not alter her. If she had loved her husband her victims would have been less mortified; but they all knew very well that Platon Napraxine was no more to her than one of the chairs in her drawing-room. If she had even loved the world she lived in, her coldness would have been more intelligible; but she did not. Her magnificent jewels, her marvellous toilettes, her many beautiful houses, her power of gratifying any whim as it formed itself, the way people looked after her postillions in their blue velvet jackets, the perpetual fête of which society was made up for her, all diverted her but moderately. She was *mondaine* to the tips of her fingers, but not enthusiastically so, only so from habit—as she wore silk stockings or had rosewater in her bath.

'I have seen the whole thing since I was sixteen; how can it entertain me much?' she said to those who marvelled at her indifference. When it was objected to her that there were many who had seen it from sixteen to sixty, and yet thought nothing else worth seeing, she shrugged her shoulders. On the whole she understood the sect of the Skoptzi better; they had an ideal. What ideal had her world?

She kept her exquisite tint and her lovely eyes unspoiled by the endless late hours and the incessant excitations in which women of the *monde où l'on s'amuse* lose their youth in a year or two. She ate very simply, drank little but water, rode or drove no matter what weather, refused forty-nine out of fifty of all the invitations she received, seldom or never made any house visits, and spent many hours in perfect repose.

'Why should you go and stay in other people's houses?' she always said to her English friends, in whom this mania is more rampant than amongst any other nationality. 'Another person's house is hardly better than an hotel; indeed, very often it is worse. If you don't like the dinner-hour, you cannot change it; if you are given slow horses, you cannot complain; if you dislike your rooms, you cannot alter them; if you think the *chef* a bad one, you cannot say so; if you find all the house party bore you, you cannot get rid of them. You must pretend to eat all day long; you must pretend to feel amiable from noon to midnight; you must have all kinds of plans made for you, and submit to them; you can never read but in your own room, and, generally speaking, there is nothing in the library—if it be an English library—except Tennyson, Wordsworth, and Mr. Darwin. I cannot imagine how any reasonable being subjects herself to such

a martyrdom only because somebody else finds their country place dull without people.'

She had also ingeniously established a reputation for very delicate health, which she found beyond anything useful to spare her from being bored, and to excuse her absence from any gathering which did not specially attract her.

'I have a *santé de fer*,' she said once to a friend, 'but happily I look very fragile, and physicians, if they think you wish it, will always promise you angina pectoris or tubercles on your lungs. I have an enchanting doctor in Paris—you know him, de Thiviers—he is very famous; he will shake his head over me as if I were doomed to die in ten minutes, and he frightens Platon out of his wits—he gets a great many rouleaux at the end of the season—and he and I look as grave as the two augurs, though, like the augurs, we are both longing to laugh. It is so useful to be thought very delicate, you have an excuse for everything. If at the last moment you don't wish to go anywhere, nobody can say anything if it be your health that gives way. They would never forgive me my continual absence from the Court at Petersburg, and I certainly should not receive my perpetual passport, if they did not sincerely believe in the tubercles which de Thiviers has so obligingly found for me. Do go to de Thiviers if you are quite well and want to be ill; he understands all that sort of thing so well, and he never betrays you. He has convinced Platon that I am *poitrinaire*.'

And between her reputation for a dangerous disease in her system, and her really intelligent care of her health, she had the paths of life made very smooth to her, and was infinitely freer from any genuine indisposition than might have been expected from the fragility of her aspect, and her Russian love of hot rooms and yellow tea. Still, as a great comedian will so identify himself with his part that he at times believes himself the thing which he represents, she did at times almost persuade herself, as she completely persuaded others, that she had some great constitutional delicacy to contend with, and she would play at medicine with little needles for morphia, or a few glasses of water at Baden-Baden or Ems, as she would play now and then at baccarat or roulette in her drawing-rooms.

'Nothing is so useful,' she would say in moments of confidence. 'Look at the quantity of weariness that there is in the world from which no other possible plan will set you free. Palace dinners, diplomatic banquets, great marriages, country-house visits, self-invited princes, imperial coronations, royal baptisms—you cannot refuse them; the laws of society forbid; but if you are known to be in delicate health, no one can be offended if, at the last moment, quite unexpectedly, you get a chill and must not stir out of your own room. When there is some unutterable social tedium loom-

ing on the horizon, I always telegraph for de Thiviers, and he is always equal to the occasion.'

In this, as in other matters, she arranged her life to her own satisfaction, without any kind of misgiving that this self-absorption was egotistical. Everything had combined to make her an egotist. An only child, adored by her father, admired and a little feared by her mother, whose most intimate secrets she had divined with all the keen intuition of her natural intelligence; surrounded from her earliest years by a court of dependents and servants who seemed only to live to minister to her caprices, flattered from her babyhood by all her father's friends, secretaries, and attachés, she had imbibed selfishness as inevitably as a young willow sucks in the moisture from the stream by which it grows. There was nothing in a loveless marriage and in the clumsy and irritating devotion of a man who was ardently in love with her, whilst she only viewed him with contempt and dislike, to counteract the influences of her earlier years. The whole world conspired to induce the Princess Napraxine to live only for herself.

That she occasionally had moments of supreme generosity, and a capacity seldom or never called out for heroic courage, did not alter the main fact that her life was essentially selfish. She never did anything that she did not wish to do; the great want in her existence, to herself, was that she so very seldom felt any wish for anything. When she did, she gratified it without any scruple or hesitation.

Her mind was too clear and logical for any creed to obtain any hold upon her; nominally, of course, she was of the Greek Church, and had too much good taste to create any scandal by openly separating herself from it; but her intelligence, as critical and as subtle as Voltaire's or Bolingbroke's, would no more have submitted to the bondage of religious superstition and tradition than she would have clothed her graceful person in one of the 'Décrochez-moi-ça' that hung in the windows of Paris clothes-shops. In morality, also, she did not much believe; she read Stuart Mill's plea for the utility of virtue once, and smiled as she closed the book with a mental verdict of 'non-proven.'

Pride (that pride which has been happily defined by a French writer as *pas d'orgueil, mais de la fierté*), and the delicacy of her taste, with her profound indifference, supplied the place in her of moral laws, and probably acted on her much more effectively than they would have done. Principle is but a palisade; temperament is a stone bastion.

'Les honnêtes gens m'ennuient et les mauvaises gens me déplaisent,' she was wont to say, with a frank confession of what many others have felt, and have not had the courage to say. She had no more rigidity of principle than any other person who has been reared in the midst of a witty, elegant, and corrupt society;

but her perfect taste supplied the place of moral convictions, the grossness of vice offended her like a bad odour, or a staring colour; and everything loose or coarse seemed to her an affront to intelligence and to refinement.

Sometimes she almost envied the women who could plunge themselves into the hot springs of a passion, only it seemed to her vulgar; the same sort of vulgarity as swimming in public in a rose-coloured *maillot*. She could swim like an otter, but she never swam in public. The noisy and ungrateful pleasures which delight modern society seemed to her sheer imbecilities, whilst she would as soon have descended to an intrigue with her cook or her coachman as have made an amorous appointment in a private room at a café, or have mounted the stairs of a hired house to meet a Lovelace of the clubs. '*Peut-on être plus bête*!' she would say, with supreme disdain, whenever she heard of the vulgarities which usually accompany Apate and Philotes in these the waning years of the nineteenth century. She quite understood the Parisienne in 'Frou-frou,' who, tempted to make an assignation, awakes to a sense of its coarseness and commonness when she finds that the temple of love is upon the third floor in the Rue du Petit Hurleur, and that the wall-paper has five-and-twenty Poniatowskys jumping into the Elster repeated on every length of it.

'In that sort of affair,' she said once, 'you must have either secrecy or a scandal; both to me seem in bad taste. And then, with the one you are at the mercy of your maid, and with the other you are at the mercy of the newspapers. To be sure,' she added, 'I cannot, perhaps, measure the force of the temptation, for I have never in my life seen any human being to meet whom I should have ever thought it worth while even to order out my *coupé*.'

Innumerable lives had done their uttermost to entwine themselves in hers, and had only broken themselves helplessly on the rock of her supreme indifference, like so many ships upon icebergs. She was a *charmeresse* in the uttermost sense of that expressive word, but she was scarcely a coquette, though the most merciless coquetry might have done much less harm than she did. A coquette desires and strives to please; Nadine Napraxine fascinated other lives to hers without effort if without pity. She had one supreme end—to endeavour to amuse herself; and she had one unending appetite—that of the study of character. She so seldom succeeded in amusing herself that she came naturally to the conclusion that most characters contained no amusing elements.

'*Vous m'ennuyez*!' was her single word of explication to those whose homage she had permitted for a while, only to send them adrift without a sign of compassion or contrition. To her the three words seemed entirely comprehensive. When some one

more daring than the others had once ventured to remind her that he had not been quite so hateful to her only a brief while before, she had said, with some impatience, 'Can one know that a book is dull unless one looks at a few pages? It is not one's fault if it be ill-written. I cannot say why you all weary me, but if you do, it is not my fault either.'

When once they wearied her it was of no use for them by any ingenuity, subserviency, or despair to attempt to regain her favour. Her path, like that of all great victors, was strewn with unregarded victims. Now and then her composure had been ruffled, when the fate of some one of these had roused the adverse comments of the world, and the issue of some duel or the fact of some suicide had had her name, by common consent, coupled with it. She disliked that kind of notoriety; sincerely disliked it with all the hauteur and disgust of a very proud and sensitive refinement; but it never made her change the tenor of her ways.

'If you do not like *du potin*, would it not be better—to—to—not to give rise to it?' Napraxine himself had once humbly ventured to suggest when she was excessively angered because the journals of the hour had ventured to introduce her name into their narratives of a duel ending in the death of the young Principe d'Ivrea, who had been very popular and beloved in French and Italian society.

'*Du potin*!' she had echoed. 'Why cannot you say scandal? What sense is there in slang? Give rise to it? Ivrea was a nice boy, but irascible like all Italians, and intensely vain; the least word irritated him. He chose to provoke de Prangins because de Prangins teased him, and the old man has been too strong for the young one. It is a great pity! he had a pretty face and a pretty manner, but I have no more to do with his death than the gilt arrow on the top of the house. Myself, I would much rather he had killed de Prangins.'

Napraxine had preserved a reverential silence; he knew that there was another side to the story, but he did not venture to say so.

When the jealousies, feuds, and quarrels which it amused her to excite and foment arrived at any such tragical conclusion as this with which the Duc de Prangins had disembarrassed her salons of a youth who of late had grown too presuming, she was always entirely innocent of being the cause of it. 'I always tell them to like each other,' she would say placidly; but therein they did not obey her.

She valued her power of destruction as the only possible means of her own amusement. It reconciled her to herself when she was most disposed to be discontented. Her delicate lips smiled with ineffable disdain when she saw other women *se tordant comme des folles*, as she expressed it, in their effort to secure the admiration or retain the passions of men, while she, merely lifting the cloud of her black lashes in the sunshine by the lake, or sitting still as

marble in the shadow of her box at the 'Français,' could anchor down by her for ever the thoughts, the desires, the regrets, the destinies of young and old, of friend and enemy, of stranger and familiar, merely by the passive magnetism of that charm which Nature had given her.

'Marie Stuart,' she said once when she closed *Chastelard*, 'a sorceress! Pooh! They make much too much of her. She had a charm, I suppose, but she could not have known how to use it, or she would never have married either Darnley or Bothwell, and she would never have allowed herself to be beaten by Elizabeth—a grey-haired virgin and a *maîtresse femme*!'

All women seemed to her to have been very weak: Josephine humiliated at Malmaison; Marie Antoinette, on the tumbril of death; Heloise, in her cell of Paraclete; Lady Hamilton, dying of want in Calais; Lady Blessington, poor and miserable in Paris:—what was the use of 'charm' if it ended like that?

'I shall reign as long as I live,' she said to herself. 'And if I live to eighty men will be still eager to hear me talk.'

CHAPTER III.

'THIS room is stifling, it is so small; and yet there are horrible draughts in it. I dare say the ridiculous walls are not an inch thick,' said the Princess Napraxine now, as she rose from the breakfast-table, and drew her delicate skirts, with their undulating waves and foam of lace, out through the glass doors and over the marble of the terrace to the sheltered nook in which she had been sitting before breakfast, where a square Smyrna carpet was placed under several cushioned lounging-chairs. It was only two o'clock, and the air was warm and full of brilliant sunshine.

'It is all in dreadful taste,' she said for the hundredth time. 'This sort of mock-Syrian scenery, mixed up with châlets, villas, and hotels, has such a look of the stage. It seems made on purpose for *maquillées* beauties, dyed and pampered gamblers, and great ladies who are received nowhere else. Places have all a physiognomy, moral as well as physical. The Riviera must have been enchanting when there was only a mule-track as wide as a ribbon between the hills and the sea from Marseilles to Genoa, but now that the moral emanations of Monte Carlo and of the *cinq heures* at all the nondescript houses, and of the baccarat groups in the clubs which are not as exclusive as they might be, have spread all along the coast like miasma, the whole thing is only a *décor de scène*, the very gardens are masquerading as Egypt, as Damascus, as Palermo. It is all *postiche*.'

'You are very cruel, Madame,' murmured Melville.

'That is the only thing you can any of you find to reply when I say anything that is true!' said the Princess, with triumph.

'The de Vannes are your nearest neighbours,' suggested her husband.

'Did you mean that Cri-Cri is *bien nature*?' she said, with her little low laugh. 'I fear neither of them will contribute anything to redeem the character of the place for either *maquillage* or gambling——'

'Why would you come to it?' he asked, with all a man's stupidity.

'Why do people ever ask one why one does things?' she interrupted, irritably. 'One imagines one will like a thing; one gets it; and directly, of course, one does not like it. That is a kind of general law. Monsignore Melville will tell us, I suppose, that it is to prevent us attaching ourselves to the pleasures of this world; but as it also operates in preventing one's attaching oneself to anybody, as well as anything, I do not know that the result is as admirable as he would imagine.'

'I never said——' began Melville.

'Oh, no, but you would say if you were in the pulpit,' she replied, before he could finish his sentence. 'You would say that even *ennui* and satiety and depression have their uses if they lead the soul to heaven; but that is just what they do not do; they only lead to morphia, chloral, dyspepsia, and Karlsbad. It is quite impossible—it must be quite impossible, even for you, Monsignore—to consider Karlsbad as an antechamber to heaven!'

Melville tried to look shocked, but did not succeed well, as he was a little Rabelaisian and Montaignist at heart, and not intended by nature for a Churchman.

'What are we going to do?' said the Prince, as he stretched himself in his chair, and lighted another cigarette.

'Stay where we are,' suggested Geraldine, who desired nothing better, as a *tête-à-tête* was a favour never accorded to him twice in twenty-four hours.

'Oh, not I, indeed!' cried Napraxine, with as much alacrity as was possible beneath his heavy 'envelope of flesh.' 'I shall go to Monte Carlo. I have told them to harness. If you like to come——'

At that moment a servant brought him a card. He read what was written in pencilled lines upon it; then raised his head with a pleased exclamation.

'*Je vous le donne en mille*!' he cried. 'Nadine, who do you think is here?'

'A goose with a diseased liver, or a hundred green oysters?' said his wife, contemptuously. 'I can imagine no lesser source for so much radiance.'

The Prince regardless of sarcasm, or tempered to endurance of it by long habit, answered placidly:

'No; it is Othmar.'

The face of Nadine Napraxine changed considerably; the most astute observer could not have decided whether annoyance or gratification was the most visible expression; her eyes lighted with a look different to the mild amusement with which she had greeted Geraldine.

'Where can he have come from?' continued her husband. 'He was in Asia a little while ago. One is always so glad to see him. He is so unlike other people. It is only you, Nadine, who do not appreciate him.'

'He is *poseur*,' said she with languor. 'But I do not know whether that is reason enough to keep him waiting at the gate?'

'I forgot,' said Napraxine. 'There is no one less *poseur*, I assure you. Clever as you are, you sometimes mistake. Grégor, beg Count Othmar to join us here.'

The servant withdrew. Princess Nadine put a large peacock fan between her and the sun; she yawned a little.

'Seven minutes for Grégor to send down to the gate, seven minutes for Othmar to come up from the gate, a minute and a half more for him to traverse the house; we have fifteen minutes and a half in which to vilify our coming friend, as modern hospitality binds us to do. Let us begin. We must be stupid indeed if we cannot kill anybody's character in a quarter of an hour.'

'There is no character to kill,' began her husband.

'Pardon me! No one can say he is characterless. He is a very marked character.'

'That was not what I meant,' said Napraxine. 'I meant that no one could say otherwise than good of him. And if there were such a one, he should not say it before me.'

Nadine Napraxine let her eye rest on her husband with a peculiar expression, half pity, half derision, which might have given him plentiful food for reflection, had he been a man who ever reflected.

'Poor Platon! He has all the antique virtues!' she said softly. 'He even thinks it necessary to defend his acquaintances behind their backs. *Quel type admirable*!'

'Why do you like Othmar, Prince?' said Geraldine, abruptly. 'I detest him.'

'Indeed?' said Napraxine, in surprise. 'You must be almost alone, then. What do you see to dislike?'

Geraldine glanced at his hostess, but she refused to accept the challenge of his regard. She was looking out to sea with a little dreamy amused smile.

'I hate all financiers,' said Geraldine, moodily and lamely. '*La grande Juiverie* is one gigantic nest of brigands; those men get everything, whilst we lose even our old acres.'

'Perhaps that is your fault,' said Prince Platon; 'and Othmar,

believe me, has nothing to do with the *Juiverie*; the Othmar are pure Croats; Croats loathe Hebrews.'

'He is very fortunate, Prince, to have your admiration and your confidence,' said Geraldine, with a sarcasm, lost on the pachydermatous placidity of his host.

'I have always liked Othmar since one day, of which I will tell you when we have more time,' answered Napraxine.

'Please tell us now,' said his wife. 'I have always been curious to know the affinity between you and Othmar. It is a walrus gambling with a stag.'

'Am I the walrus? It is an awkward animal,' said her husband good-humouredly. 'No, the tale can wait; he will be here in a moment.'

'If he were an Admirable Crichton he would be detestable, if only because he is so hideously rich,' interrupted Geraldine, with sullenness, 'and the Princess has already spoken of another defect, the greatest a man can have, to my thinking; he is *poseur*.'

'Pshaw!' said the Prince. 'How? What do you mean? Othmar, I should say, never thinks of himself.'

'Oh, he is *poseur*, certainly,' said Geraldine, with an undisguised cruel exultation in the cruel epithet. 'He is a Crœsus, and he poses for simplicity; he is a financier, and he poses as a grand-seigneur; he is gorged with gold, and he poses as a Spartan on black broth. The whole life of the man is affectation. His humility is as detestable as his pride; his liberalities are as offensive as his possessions.'

'*Tiens, tiens*!' murmured Napraxine, taking his cigar out of his mouth. 'My dear friend, you are under my roof, or at least on my terrace, so I cannot quarrel with you. I can only ask you kindly to remember what I said a little while ago, and to spare me again recalling to you that Othmar also is my friend. You will understand.'

Geraldine coloured slightly, conscious of having been ill-bred, and muttered sullenly, 'I beg your pardon.' A more tart and stinging retort was on his lips, to the effect that the new comer was the last man on earth whom his host should welcome, but his awe of the Princess Napraxine repressed it. She herself gave her husband a glance of more appreciation than she had ever cast on him, and said to herself, 'The walrus is the clumsiest and the stupidest of all living creatures, but it is so honest——' and said aloud:

'Verify your quotations, was the advice given by a dying don to an Oxford student. Geraldine quoted from me, but he did not stay to verify what he quoted. I spoke in haste. Othmar is a tiny trifle of a *poseur*, but it is quite unconsciously; it is the consequence of an anomalous position. All his instincts refuse to be the Samuel Bernard of his generation, and he is equally horrified at the idea of appearing as a Sidonia. If he had only ten

thousand francs a year to-morrow he would be happy and charming. As it is, with his ten millions or his ten hundred millions, there is always the sense of that wall of ingots filling up the background, and keeping, as he thinks, the sunshine out of his life. Occasionally it makes him see everything yellow, like the jaundice, and to everybody else it makes him seem a colossus, which is distressing to him, as he is of ordinary stature.'

'He is even taller than I am,' said her husband.

Princess Napraxine, who had made her little speech languidly, looking at the sea, and extended full length on her Indian cane chair, said with a little smile:

'My dear, I spoke metaphorically. I did not mean to underrate your friend's centimètres. I meant merely to explain that if he do look occasionally a *poseur* it is the fault of Europe, which, ever since he was born, has persisted in worshipping him as one of the incarnations of Mammon. If he had belonged to *la grande Juiverie* he would have been much happier. Jews can swallow any amount of flattery as they can wear any number of rings. He likes neither.'

'Count Othmar,' announced Grégor, ascending the terrace steps from the gardens.

The person announced was a man of some thirty years old, with delicate and handsome features, and an expression at once gentle and cold; his height was great, and his bearing that of a *grand seigneur*. He looked weary and dissatisfied; yet his life was one of the most envied of Europe. He greeted Napraxine with warmth, the Princess with grace and ceremony; Geraldine and his sister with a rather cold courtesy.

Nadine Napraxine had flushed a little as he kissed her hand; a lovely faint flush which made her cheeks like two pale-pink seashells. Geraldine noticed that momentary change of colour, and thought bitterly, 'She never looked like that for *me*!'

Napraxine was not so observant; his hospitable soul was filled with the pleasure of welcoming his friend, and he felt angered with his wife because she said so indifferently:

'I wonder you did not stay amongst the Mongols, Othmar. They must be much more original than we are. They ride all day long, don't they, over deserts of grass? How enchanting! I wonder you could tear yourself away.'

'Perhaps it would have been wiser to stay,' said Othmar, with a meaning which she alone understood. 'But I fear "the world holds us" too strongly for us to be long content even with a Tartar mare and a fat sheep's tail. I am fortunate to find you all here. I came from Egypt; I saw your name in a newspaper, and could not resist driving over to La Jacquemerille.'

'You have your "Berenice"?'

'Yes; she has behaved very well; we met with a typhoon in the Indian Ocean, and were nearly lost; but she has been patched

up and ran home bravely. I have left her at Marseilles to be thoroughly overhauled.'

'You will have to try her in a match with Geraldine's "Zostera."'

'I could not hope to compete with Count Othmar,' said Geraldine, sullenly; for him the skies were overcast, the sun was clouded, the pretty marble terrace with its gay awnings seemed dark with the gloom of night.

He hated La Jacquemerille which he had been so eager to persuade his friends to inhabit: who could have told that this man would drop on this Mediterranean shore without note of warning, at a moment when he was supposed to be safe on the sandy steppes of Mongolia? 'As Count Othmar never, I believe, shot anything in his life, I cannot perceive what possible attraction any wild life can have for him,' he added now, in a tone that was aggressive and impertinent.

Othmar glanced at him with a regard which said much, as he replied simply: 'I have shot the most noxious animal—man; I have never, I confess, shot wood doves or tame pheasants.'

'Geraldine will shoot doves all the week,' said the Princess, with a sense that La Jacquemerille had become interesting. She loved to see men on the brink of a quarrel: sometimes she restrained them from passing the brink; sometimes she did not; sometimes she helped them over it with a little imperceptible touch, light as the touch of a feather, which yet had all the power of electricity.

'That is modern knighthood,' said Othmar. 'I prefer my Mongols.'

'My brother is English,' said Lady Brancepeth, to avert disagreeable rejoinders; 'he always reminds me of the old French caricature: "It is a beautiful day; let us go and kill something."'

'Othmar is more English than Croat,' said Napraxine, 'but he does not kill things, he prefers to paint them.'

'*Crésus doublé de Corôt*,' murmured his wife. 'Othmar, have you sketched any Mongol ladies? are there such beings? or are they only as that terrible Dumas has it, *la femelle de l'homme*?'

'Only *la femelle de l'homme*, Madame. They cannot be said to be women in any civilised sense of that term; they only know the duties of maternity, and are ignorant of the victories of coquetry. You will perceive that they are an entirely elementary animal.'

Princess Nadine heard with a little smile; she knew what allusions to herself were contained in the words.

'You should have married one of them,' she said, slowly moving her big fan. 'It would have been too picturesque; the owner of two hundred millions dwelling by choice under a pole and a piece of blue cloth, and——'

'Cannot you forbear to quote my millions?' said Othmar. 'You would not reproach a hunchback with his hump.'

'Though it is the only thing which makes him noticeable,' muttered Geraldine, but the fear of his hostess made him speak too low to be overheard save by Othmar, who did not deign to notice the insolence.

'You think money is not interesting,' said the Princess Nadine, 'but you are wrong. It is the Haroun al Raschid of our day. It is the wand of Mercury. It is the sunshine of life. Only fancy, Othmar, if you chose you could make the desert blossom like the rose; you could call up a city like Paris in the centre of your Mongolian steppes; that is very interesting indeed. Money itself is not so, but when one considers its enormous influence, its fantastic powers, it is so; it is even more, it is positively bewitching.'

'When it comes out of anything so fairylike and invisible as the Prince's salt-crystals it may be,' replied Othmar, 'but not when it is tainted by commerce. Remember, Princess, your Mercury was the god of the mart and of the thieves.'

'That was in the Roman decadence.'

'And are we not in a decadence?'

'It is the fashion to say so, but I am not sure. Have we decayed? and, if we have, from what? The last century contained nothing noble.'

'Even the burning of Moscow belongs to this,' said Othmar, with a bow to Napraxine, whose grandfather had been one of the foremost generals at the defence of Moscow, and one of the chief counsellors of that heroic sacrifice.

'Othmar always remembers what is fine in history and in his friends,' said the Prince, well pleased. 'He is not like Nadine there.'

'No, indeed,' said Lady Brancepeth; 'she always likes to see that a great man is a little one somewhere; she will always find out the speck on the handsome rosy apple, the yellow stain on the ivory, the rift in the lute—that is her way. She would never have admired Dr. Johnson, she would have only laughed at his uncouthness and his dishes of tea, and only seen that he touched all the posts in the streets.'

'I cannot help it if I am observant, and Dr. Johnson certainly would have bored me,' said the Princess.

'Les délicats sont malheureux:
Rien ne saurait les satisfaire,'

quoted Othmar.

'Then you and I are both profoundly miserable,' said Nadine Napraxine. 'I believe we have never found anything that satisfied either of us.'

'Except, perhaps, each other,' muttered Geraldine, in a smothered voice, his jealousy conquering his prudence. It was a phrase which no one heard except his hostess, who was as quick at hearing

as Fine Ears. She did not deign to take any notice of it; it could be punished at her leisure.

'What an idiot he is,' she thought; 'as if *that* tone could ever succeed with *me*!'

She had herself become amused, serene, good-tempered, immediately, that with the entrance of Othmar the twin masks of tragedy and comedy had appeared to her prescient eyes to lie upon the stage of the terrace of La Jacquemerille. The whole place changed to her: the view was beautiful, the house was quaint and full of colour and variety, the orange wood was a delightful bit of local colour, the marble colonnade and the brown wooden balconies were absurd certainly, but garlanded about with all those sweet American creepers they had a graceful effect; nowhere else in December would you get roses and geraniums and white marbles and blue waves, and a thermometer at 20° Réaumur.

Othmar had brought that dramatic element into her life without which, despite her really very high intelligence, ennui was apt to descend upon her. When his eyes encountered that look they became very cold, and had a challenge in them: the challenge of a man who defies a woman to make him again the slave of her caprices. Her husband saw nothing of those glances. Geraldine saw more even than there was to see, and became moody and dejected. He only roused himself now and then to say what he thought might be hostile or disagreeable to the new comer. His remarks were ignored by Othmar, which increased his irritation. The Princess was amused, as she was, occasionally, at a good theatre, by the sullenness of the one man and by the coldness of the other. Both had elements, perhaps, of tragedy and comedy. She felt a sudden exhilaration and increase of interest, such as a person fond of a theatre feels when the great actor of the hour makes his entry on the scene. Geraldine was very useful, she had known him several years: he was always hopelessly in love with her, timid, devoted, and obedient; but he had no originality of character to make him very interesting. He was extremely good-looking, very popular, and very amiable, but he was commonplace; he had not the wit of his sister. She had admitted him into her intimacy because he was humble, handsome, and usually so docile that he seldom irritated her, but he gave no interest to her life whatever; whereas Othmar—she had scarcely ever confessed it even to herself—but whilst Othmar had been lost to sight in the wilds of Asia, society had seemed to her even more stupid than usual.

One had been in love with her for a year; the other two years before had loved her. There was a considerable difference in the two passions, which she, with her analytical mind, could perfectly appraise.

For the one she was quite sure of her sentiment in return. He was good-looking, agreeable, useful, submissive; he diverted her

sometimes, wearied her occasionally, obeyed her always. She liked him, and liked better still to tease him. The other had brought into her life a sense of a stormier emotion than she cared to raise. He had been more in earnest than she chose to allow; he had loved her imperiously, ardently, unreasonably; when she had made light of it, he had left her with indignation and scorn. He had been one of those who had fought a duel about her, though none but himself and his adversary had ever known that she was the cause of it, a card at *écarté* having served as the colourable pretext. She had never been quite sure what she had felt for him; admiration in a way, perhaps, but more, she thought, dislike. But his had been one of the conquests which had most flattered her. When he had left all his habits and friends and possessions to plunge into Asian solitudes, she had felt that her power over him was illimitable. And now he had returned and told her, with as much chill assertion as a regard could convey, that her power existed no more for him. She did not care, but the change interested her, and piqued her.

'Poor Othmar!' she had said often to herself, when remembering the passages which had passed between them, and thinking of him in Asia; and now he was back from Asia, and sitting on her garden-terrace at La Jacquemerille, and was telling her by manner and by glance—perhaps telling her too persistently and insistantly for it to be entirely true—that he had vanquished his madness.

It had been a strong, if short-lived, madness, born first in a country-house in the Ardennes, in autumn woods and tapestried galleries and the stately revelries of a Legitimist party of pleasure, fanned by her own will into flame in the course of a brilliant, giddy, insensate winter season in Paris. Then with spring had come the decisive moment when he had declined to be content any longer with his position, and he had been lightly laughed at, disdainfully jested with, and had revolted, and had gone out of Europe after a duel which had made even her tranquil pulses beat a little quickly in apprehension of the possible issue.

With her usual consummate tact she had so borne herself that the six or eight months' devotion, in which Othmar had been the shadow of her every step, had attracted no injurious notice from her husband or her world. It was known that he was passionately attached to her, but so many were so also, that beyond a little more attention than usual, because he was a more conspicuous person than most, the great world of Paris only smiled and watched to see if the snowflake melted. It did not melt, and he went to Asia. The duel had only come out of a trivial dispute at a club, so every one believed, Prince Napraxine as innocently as the rest.

It was after the departure of Othmar that her society took to naming her the *flocon de neige*. It seemed strange, both to men

and women, that Othmar should have been so near her so long and have left no impression on her life. He had usually a strong influence on those whom he sought; in this instance he had been the magnetised, not the magnetiser.

Men always quoted Princess Nadine to their wives as an example to be followed, for the serene indifference with which she flirted all the year through, yet never was compromised by a breath of calumny. Their wives sometimes retorted that she had no heart, so could not lose it.

'I promise you I will never be compromised,' she had said to her father a few months after her marriage; and he, a very easy and philosophic man of the world, had answered:

'I am sure you mean what you say; but the test of your resolution will come whenever you shall meet the person who pleases you. At present you laugh at them all.'

'I do not think I shall ever care,' she had said, with much accurate knowledge of herself.

Othmar, momentarily lava, had thrown himself in vain against this indifference; the ice of her temperament had not changed under the volcanic fires of his. All those airy nothings, that capricious friendship, that unrecompensed position of servitude which she offered him, he would have none of, and told her so with passion and force.

'And I will have no melodramatic passions to disturb me,' she had said. 'They are absurd. They are out of date. They are tiresome.'

Wounded and incensed, he had taken her at her word more completely and instantly than she had intended; and she had not known whether to feel regret or relief. She had felt a good deal of triumph. And now he had returned, unchanged in appearance, handsomer even for that duskier hue which the desert sun had left on the marble of his features and she, and he himself, were silently wondering—was she glad?

He thought she was annoyed; Napraxine thought so too; Geraldine alone, with a lover's self-paining penetration, felt that life had grown sweeter and more stimulating to her, that her languid interest in existence had grown quicker of pulse and more content with its own atmosphere since her husband had read aloud the name of Othmar on the pencilled card.

Perhaps, thought he also, with a lover's self-torture, what he had found in her of indifference, of disdain, of lack of sympathy, had been due to the absence of the sole person who possessed the power to touch her dormant emotions.

In reality, Madame Napraxine at that moment felt no more than the vague expectation and gratification of a spectator at a theatre, who sees a drama complicate itself, mingled with a certain sense of curiosity as to why Othmar sought to display to her so conspicuously his escape from her sorcery. She was not morti-

fied; she was accustomed to change her adorers into her friends, and she was of a nature too integrally proud to be capable of small things. She only wondered—and doubted a little.

Could anyone who had loved her once fail to love her all his life?

She thought not. Yet she was not vain.

CHAPTER IV.

THE "Zostera" looks tempting in the sunshine,' said Nadine Napraxine, as she rose and leaned on the marble balustrade to gaze over the sea, where the stately sailing yacht of Geraldine was at anchor outside the little bay of La Jacquemerille, which was too shallow to be entered. 'I will go out in her in ten minutes' time. I prefer to watch the sunset from the sea, and the sunset will be very fine to-day, for there are a few clouds above; the sky is usually so terribly monotonous here, it is like an eulogy of your predecessor at the Academy: *il y a trop de bleu*. Monsignore, I will take you back to Nice by the coast. I dislike coasting usually, but along this shore it is pretty, and besides, it is too late to go far out to sea. Lord Geraldine, go and give your men the order. I will go and change my clothes. Wilkes, you will come?'

Geraldine sullenly obeyed, and went down the steps to where his long boat was still in waiting. In a very few moments the Princess Napraxine returned, not clothed in any maritime fashion, for she thought that sort of thing theatrical, foolish, and staring; but wearing a dark serge gown, fitting with marvellous precision to the perfect contour and lines of her form, and carrying a scarlet parasol large enough to shelter the dignity of any Chinese mandarin. She wore yachting shoes and scarlet stockings; her feet, like her hands, were such as sculptors dream of but seldom see.

'Tell them to put in my furs,' she said to Geraldine. 'Are you ready? It is always so cold here when the sun has gone down. We will take Count Othmar and Monsignore Melville to Nice. It is a beautiful day for a sail, just wind enough and not too much. Platon goes to his adored *tripot*; I wonder he stayed to eat his breakfast.'

'The "Zostera," of course, is at your commands,' murmured Geraldine, with ill-disguised ill-humour. 'For myself, if you will excuse me, I will accompany the Prince.'

She smiled, understanding his ill-humour well enough.

'How immoral they are!' she said to Melville. 'The *salle de jeu* by daylight is monstrous; but since it is their form of happiness——'

'Happiness!' muttered Geraldine between his teeth.

'All your preaching and mine will not alter them,' she continued. 'It is an extraordinary thing; neither Platon nor Lord Geraldine cares a straw for money; neither of them would awake a whit merrier if their fortunes were quadrupled to-morrow; and yet they find absolute intoxication in playing for money! What an inexplicable anomaly! Othmar is far more consistent. He despises his own fortune and the table of M. Blanc with equal sincerity.'

'I do not despise wealth, I dislike it,' said Othmar.

'Why should you do either?' said Melville. 'Look at the immense potentialities of great riches.'

'That is what I said this morning,' continued Princess Nadine.

'Surely great riches help one very nearly to happiness,' continued Melville. 'I do not mean from the *bourgeois* point of view, but simply because they remove so many material obstacles in the way of happiness. There can be hardly any great difficulties for a very rich man. He goes where he chooses, he can purchase whatever he desires; there are swept aside from his path for ever all the thousand-and-one annoyances and hindrances which beset the man who is not rich. Only imagine a person who cannot reach his dying child because he has not money enough for the journey; imagine another who has his homestead made intolerable to him by the erection of a steam-mill, and yet is obliged to end his days in it because he cannot afford to move; imagine yet another with weak lungs, who would recover his strength if he could take a house in the country, in the south, and yet cannot leave his business, which chains him to a city in the north. Those are the sort of sorrows from which wealth sets free a man or a woman. One may say roughly, I think, that if his health be good, a very rich person is exempt from all other misfortunes than those which come to him from his affections or his friendships; his troubles are, in a word, entirely those of sentiment.'

'Precisely,' said Nadine Napraxine.

'Un seul être est mort et tout est dépeuplé!'

murmured Othmar; 'you will not allow, or cannot comprehend that, Princess?'

'I can imagine that a man might fancy so for twenty-four hours; but even if the fancy endure, a rich man can enjoy his desolation while a poor man cannot. Part of the advantages of the rich man consist in his having the leisure and the luxury to muse upon his own unhappiness. I think you forget what a great happiness that is!'

'You believe neither in love nor in sorrow,' said Othmar, abruptly.

'I am aware they exist, if you mean that,' she replied; 'but their existence chiefly depends upon the imagination.'

Othmar gave an impatient gesture.

'And, like all pleasures of the imagination,' she added, 'require leisure for their development. The rich man or woman enjoys that leisure, and if he or she like to raise a gigantic mushroom under glass, in the way of exaggerated affections or sentimental regrets, they are at liberty to do so. Besides, surely, no one can deny that there is a captivating sense of power in vast riches; the fancy can take endless flights in that golden sphere; we do not know that delight, because, though people think us rich, in reality we are no such thing; in reality our expenses keep for ever ahead of our income, as I think they do with most people; but Othmar, who is actually, positively, fabulously rich, who is all alone, who spends nothing on himself—at least, he used to spend nothing—why, he could build you a cathedral, Monsignore Melville, in every city of the world, of jasper and chalcedony, whatever they are, and never be a sou the poorer for doing it.'

'Are you inclined, Count Othmar?' said Melville.

'If it would make all men like you I should be so,' said Othmar. 'But I regret to see that the Princess Napraxine has apparently retained only one recollection of me, and that one is of my "wall of ingots," as she termed it, which appears to separate me from her sympathies.'

'Did you hear that?' she said, not very well pleased, though it was not in human power to confuse her. 'We will let those people go to Monte Carlo, and we will have a run before the wind and leave you and Monsignore at Nice.'

'But it is not my own yacht.'

'But it is mine when I am in it, and I invite you both. Come.'

Othmar hesitated till she gave him a little look, one brief fleeting look. Two years seemed to have fled away; he was again on the staircase of the Grand Opéra, she gave him her fan to carry, she had on a cloak of soft white feathers, a gardenia dropped out of her bouquet, he picked it up; in the whole glittering mass of Paris he only saw that one delicate face, pale as a narcissus, with two wonderful liquid eyes like night; and, with a sort of shock, he recollected himself, and realised that he was standing on the terrace of La Jacquemerille beside a woman whom he had vowed to put out of his life for ever and aye.

'Come!' said Princess Nadine, and he did not resist her.

He followed in her shadow down the flight of marble steps leading to the sea; while Geraldine, with a tempestuous rage stifled in his heart, drove Napraxine (who never drove himself), as furiously as Russian horses can be driven, along the sunny road, shaded with olives and caruba trees, which led from La Jacquemerille to the gambler's paradise a few miles westward on the shore.

'When boys sulk, they should always be punished,' thought the Princess Nadine with silent diversion, as she heard the plunge and rush of the horses on the other side of the gardens, and

divined that their driver was already repenting of the moment of petulance and of jealousy in which he had exiled himself from her presence, and condemned himself to the society of her lord.

'Poor Platon is the dullest of companions, and Geraldine thinks it *dans son rôle* to detest him; and yet he goes with him by way of showing his pique against Othmar. How stupid, how intensely stupid!' she thought, with exceeding amusement to herself, as she descended the water-stairs and stepped into Geraldine's boat.

It was droll to her that anybody should either detest or envy her husband, he was so infinitesimally little in her own life. She readily did justice to his good humour, his loyalty, his courage, and his honesty; but those qualities were all obscured by his dulness and heaviness, and also by the simple fact that he was her husband, as the good points in a landscape are blotted out by a fog. 'Dogs' virtues! all of them,' she called them, with a mixture of esteem and impatience, of appreciation and contempt.

The boat glided through a quarter of a mile of blue water, and brought them to the side of Geraldine's yacht, a beautiful racer-like schooner with canvas white as foam, and flying the pennon of Cowes.

'My poor "Berenice" was once as elegant and spotless as this,' said Othmar, 'but she has been through sore stress of weather. Her sails are rags, her sides are battered, her rudder is gone. She made a sorry spectacle when we hove to last night, but I am attached to her. I shall not buy another yacht.'

'You always take things so seriously,' said Princess Nadine. 'A yacht is a toy like any other; when one is broken get another. Why should you be attached to a thing of teak and copper?'

'She has served me well,' he said simply. 'You do not understand attachment of any kind, Princess.'

'It is only an amiable form of prejudice. Certainly I do not understand why you should be attached to a thing made of wood and metal.'

'Or to a thing made of flesh and blood! I believe that is equally ridiculous in the eyes of Madame Napraxine,' said Othmar, with some bitterness. 'May I ask, how are your children?' he added after a pause.

'My two ugly little boys? Oh, quite well; they are never anything else. They are as strong as ponies. They are *very* ugly; they have the Tartar face, which is the ugliest in Europe; they are so like Platon that it is quite absurd.'

Othmar was silent; the words did not seem to him in her usual perfectly good taste. They did not accord with the delicate, narcissus-like face of their speaker.

'I remember that you never cared for your children,' he said; and added, after a pause, 'Nor for anything that had the misfortune to love you.'

'I do not think the children love me at all,' she said, with a smile. 'Why should they? Their father they adore because he adores them. It is always *quid pro quo* in any love.'

'Not always,' said Othmar, curtly.

'Ah, you love me still,' thought Princess Nadine, without astonishment.

Aloud she said: 'It must be, or the thing is absurd; it dies a natural death, or rather, is starved to death; nothing one-sided has any strength.'

'I think you have seen many living proofs to the contrary,' he answered. 'But pride may strangle a love which is not shared; it is a violent death, but a sure one.'

'Why will men always talk of love?' she said, with some impatience. 'After all, how little place it takes up in real life! Ambition, society, amusement, politics, money-making, a hundred things, take up a hundredfold more space.'

'It is not to every one the unnecessary molecule that it is to Madame Napraxine,' said Othmar. 'You have seen a glass of water touched by a single drop of quinine? It is only a drop, but it embitters the whole glassful. So do the attachments of life embitter it.'

'If you put the drop in, no doubt,' said Princess Napraxine, dryly.

'Or if some one else put it in,' muttered Othmar, 'before one knows what one drinks.'

'Oh! one must never let others meddle with one, even in drinking a glass of water,' replied his tormentor. She knew very well that he meant to reproach her, but she bore the reproach lightly. If the remembrance of her embittered any man's existence, it was not her fault; it was the fault of those who would not be content with adoring her as the poor people of this seashore adored their Madonna, shut away behind a glass case.

'By the way, Othmar, have you not a villa here?' she said, suddenly remembering the fact. 'I believe you have five hundred and fifty-five houses altogether, have you not? Is there not some place near Nice that belongs to you?'

'S. Pharamond? Yes. It is where I slept last night. My father bought some olive and pine woods, and built the house in the midst of them. It has a fine view seaward.'

'Then we shall be neighbours?'

'If I do not go to Paris.'

'Of course you will go to Paris, but you will go one day and come back another, like everybody else at this season; though, to be sure, I dare say you are longing for a smell of the asphalte after a cycle of Cathay.'

'No; the asphalte is not necessary to me. It is more monotonous, on the whole, than the desert.'

'Ah! you were never a *Parisien parisiennant*; you were

always in revolt against something or another, though one never could understand very well what. When you condescended to our amusements, it was with the air of a man who, to please a child, plays with tin soldiers; that sort of air of contemptuous condescension has made you many enemies. There is nothing makes the world so angry as indifference to what it thinks delightful.'

'You have offended it in that way yourself, Princess.'

'Often; but not quite with your insolence. A man who prefers his library to the clubs is beyond all pardon; and, besides, I am seen everywhere where it is worth while to be seen; you are —or were—generally conspicuous by your absence.'

'I imagine the world has grown as indifferent to me as I am to it; and, having forgotten, has so forgiven me. I have been away eighteen months.'

'The world never forgets its rich men, my dear Othmar. It may forget its great ones; will forget them, indeed, unless they have a drum beaten very loudly before them. You might be great, I think, if you liked; you have so many talents, so much power.'

'I might buy a kingdom the size of Morocco or Montenegro? Very likely: such sovereignty does not attract me.'

'Of course I do not mean that: you do not want to be a Prince Floristan; you do not love the race of princes well enough. But were I you, I should set some great ambition before me.'

'Pardon me; you would do no such thing if you were in my position. You would feel, as I feel, the numbing influence of what you called just now the "blank wall of ingots." When you can buy men you do not estimate them highly enough either to serve or rule them. I have all I can possibly want—materially. I have no reason to seek anything.'

'Why do English nobles enter public life? They want nothing, materially, either. Some of them are of rank, also, so high in place that nothing can be added to their position.'

'God knows why they do,' said Othmar, 'except that I think the Englishman is an animal like the beaver, not happy without work. Besides, I think they imagine that they serve their country —a delusion, but an honourable one, which must make them very happy. As I have no country I cannot be attached to it.'

'You could choose one; you are allied to several.'

'That would not be the same thing. To adore the motherland one must have known no arms, no hearts but hers; no country is more than a stepmother to me.'

'You are a very much envied man, Othmar, but you are not a happy man.'

He looked her straight in the eyes.

'I have been unhappy, but I have conquered my folly. It is ingratitude to fate to be wretched while one has health and strength and no material cares to contend with.'

'All the same, you are not happy now,' she thought, but she said, with her sweetest smile, 'You admit that you have all you want materially; all the rest is a dream, not worth keeping awake about for one hour. By the way, as you speak of countries—you are French now by law, I think?'

'My grandfather was naturalised for his own interests, as you know; but our people were Croat peasants.'

'I know I have heard you always say so; but I believe it is a fable. *You* do not come from any peasantry; besides, surely Sclavonia is old enough and dim enough to give you any mystical heroic ancestry you may prefer.'

'They might be robbers,' said Othmar, 'I do not know. There is not much to choose.'

'Everybody who is noble comes from robbers of some sort,' said Princess Napraxine; 'what were the Hohenstauffen, the Hohenzollern, the Habsburg, the Grimaldi, the Montefeltro, the Colonna? Robbers all, sitting on high in their fortresses, and swooping down like hawks on the fords, on the highways, on the moorlands, on the forests, on the little towns below them. You may be quite sure that is what your people did in Croatia.'

'You are very kind to try and console me,' said Othmar. 'Nobility, I think, consists in being able to trace the past of your forefathers and to have your charters; the past of mine is lost in darkness, and my charters are lost with them. Truthfully, we can only date from 1767, when Marc Othmar, who dealt in horses, began to lend money in Agram. It is not a lofty beginning; it is not even a creditable one. But I do not think that to pretend that Marc Othmar, the horse dealer or horse stealer, was a hero and saint would mend matters. I accept him as what he was, but I cannot be proud of him; even sometimes I am on the eve of cursing him; at all events, of wishing he had never existed.'

'My dear Othmar, you are very strange sometimes——'

'Am I? One is never content with what one has. There is nothing strange in that. If you will deign to remember me at all, you will remember that I was never pleased with being the head of the house of Othmar; I would give all its millions for an unblemished descent.'

'Then you are ungrateful to your fortunes, and do not understand your own times.'

'Perhaps I understand them too well, and that is why I despise what they over-estimate.'

'And over-estimate yourself what they have found worth but little. Look at most of our contemporaries and associates. Have their unblemished names served them in much? How many have remembered that *noblesse oblige*? How many of them ally themselves with the mud of the earth for the sake of large dowries? How many mortgage their old lands till they have not a sod left which they can call their own? How many waste all their

energies and all their health in a routine of miserable and stupid follies which are hardly even to be dignified as vice?'

She spoke with animation; her cheeks had a faint flush, delicate as that of the waxen bells of the begonia flowers, her eyes were full of light. Othmar looked at her with a passion of regret. If only she had loved him, he thought he could have conquered the world, have renewed the impossibilities of Alexander, have done all that visionary boys dream of doing as they read their Euripides or their Æschylus in a summer noon under blossoming lime trees.

'You will take from Rome what you yourself have carried there,' says a German writer, and it is with love the same thing; you take from it what you carry to it, you get out of it so much spirituality, and no more, than you bear thereto. To others Nadine Napraxine was a coquette, a *mondaine*, a mere *élégante* of the elegant world; but to him she was the one woman of the earth; she could have inspired him with any heroism, she could have moved him to any sacrifice, she could have compensated him for any loss; he saw in her a million possibilities which no one ever saw, which might be only the fruits of his imagination, but yet were wholly real to him, unspeakably lovely and attractive. She had offended him, alienated him, treated his ardour and his earnestness as a baby treats its toys, and his reason condemned her inexorably and often; yet she was the one woman on earth for him, and he had tried to hate her, to drive her out of his memory, and had thought that he succeeded, and had only failed.

'If you were like other men of your generation,' she pursued, 'you would be much more content. You do not care for any of the things which fill up their time. You have magnificent horses but you never race with them, you never even hunt. You care nothing for cards, or for any games of hazard. You do not shoot except, as you justly observed, a fellow-creature now and then when he provokes you. You do not care to have yourself talked about, which is the supreme felicity of the age you live in; your solitary extravagance is to have operas and concerts given in your own houses with closed doors, like Ludwig of Bavaria, and that seems rather an eccentricity than an extravagance to the world at large. You are a great student, but you care about the contents of your books, not about the binding or the date of their edition, so that you never commit the follies of a bibliophile. You do not care about any of your fine places; you have an idea that you would like a cottage just because you are tired of palaces. You vex women by your indifference to their attractions, and men by your indifference to their pursuits. Because circumstance has made you a conspicuous person with an electric light always upon you, you sigh to be an *homme d'intérieur*, with no light on you at all except that of your own hearth. It is Louis Seize and the locksmith, Domitian and the cabbage-garden, Honorius and the hens, over again. History always repeats itself, and how one wishes that it did not!'

'I am flattered, Madame, that you deign to draw my portrait, since it shows that you have not wholly forgotten my features,' said Othmar, with some bitterness. 'At present I have not discovered the hen, the cabbages, or the keys that will make life worth living to me. No doubt the fault lies with myself.'

'I think you have not the dramatic instinct which alone makes life interesting,' replied Nadine Napraxine. 'You do not divert yourself with the faults, the follies, and the meannesses of men; you sigh over them, and your regret is so poignant that it prevents your seeing how infinitely droll their blunders are in reality.'

'I think,' she continued, 'that there are only two ways of looking on life which make it interesting, or even endurable. The one is the way of Corot, which adores Nature, and can find an absolute ecstasy in the sound of the wind and the play of the sunshine, and asks nothing more of fate than a mill-stream and a handful of green leaves. The other is the way of Rochefoucauld and of St. Simon, which finds infinite and unending diversion in watching the feebleness and the mistakes of human nature, which regards the world with what I call the dramatic instinct, and amuses itself endlessly with the attitudes and genuflections of its courtiers, the false phrases and the balked calculations. Now, though you are a very clever man, my dear Othmar, you cannot be put in either of these categories. You know too much of the world for the first, and you have too much softness of heart for the second. Now, were you like Baron Fritz——'

'My uncle is the one perfectly happy man that I have ever known,' replied Othmar. 'It is because he is the most perfect of egotists. According to him the sun shines only for the Othmar, as Joshua fancied it only shone for the Israelites.'

'It is not only that,' she said, 'it is because he has the dramatic instinct. He sees the dramatic side to all that he does; suppliant monarchs, bankrupt statesmen, intriguing diplomatists; men who carry him schemes to tunnel the earth from pole to pole, and great ladies who want him to lend them money on their family diamonds; they are all so many comedians in the eyes of Baron Fritz. He pulls their strings and makes them dance at his pleasure. I quite understand how the whole comedy amuses him so greatly that he can never be conscious of a moment of *ennui*. It is a great pity that you are not like that. You would leave such witty memoirs! —for you can be witty—or you would be if you were not always so melancholy.'

'I regret, Madame,' said Othmar, 'that I cannot alter the manner of my life even to have the honour of amusing you after my death!'

Across the bows of the 'Zostera' at that moment there passed, perilously near, one of the lateen-sailed boats so common on the coast, with their freights of fruits, of fish, of olives, or of market produce. The boat was full of lemons and of oranges, which

gleamed like virgin gold in the bright sunshine of the tranquil afternoon. A peasant woman was managing the sail, a young girl was steering.

'What a beautiful face!' said Nadine Napraxine, who had a great love of beauty, and a frank acknowledgment of it of a woman high above all possibilities of envy.

Othmar looked where she pointed.

'A very lovely face,' he said indifferently.

'She does not look like a peasant,' continued Mme. Napraxine; 'that little grey gown speaks of some convent. She steers well, for they were terribly near. Who is that very pretty child, Monsignore? I suppose you know all the flock of which you are given the winter shepherding.'

'Pray do not make me responsible for all the black sheep of these shores,' said Melville, drawing near and looking at the boat, which was going slowly and heavily against the wind, and labouring under a weighty load. He said as he did so, with a little surprise:

'Why, that is Yseulte de Valogne!'

'Yseulte de Valogne! What a name of the Romaunt de la Rose and black-letter Chronicles! Pray who may she be, may I ask?'

'They call her here Cendrillon,' said Melville, a little sadly. 'As for her name, the de Valogne belong to French history; surely you remember to have heard of some of them? Aymar, who fell at the combat of the Thirty; and Adhémar, who was Constable of France under Louis XII.; and Maximin, who was a General under Condé; and Gui, who was ruined by his display at Versailles, a Colonel of the Guard and a great officer of State. The family is as historic as the Louvre itself, but the poor child is literally *sans le sou*.'

'So that she is reduced to sell oranges?' said Nadine. 'How very touching! Othmar will purchase immediately several bales.'

'No, she does not sell oranges,' said Melville, 'but perhaps she is more to be pitied than those who do. A great name and no dower—it is to have silver bells to your shoes but no stockings inside them.'

'Surely she must have stockings, I mean relations?'

'Only very distant ones. She is a far-off cousin of your friend and neighbour the Duchesse de Vannes, who brings her up; that is, sends her to her convent, pays for her frocks, and allows her to pass her holidays at one of de Vannes' country-houses. I do not know that we could reasonably expect the Duchesse to do more, only there are two ways of doing a thing, and she does not do this in the best possible manner.'

'Cri-Cri cannot love a very pretty girl of sixteen; it would not be in nature, certainly not in her nature,' said the Princess, with

one of her moments of frankness. 'I imagine they will make her embrace the religious life; what else can they do with her?'

'It is what they will probably end with,' said Melville, with a tinge of sadness. 'It is hard for a girl of noble blood and no dower to end otherwise in France. The men who ought to marry her, her equals, will marry instead some Americans with dollars, whose fathers were stokers or pork-butchers.'

'But are there no other de Valogne?'

'None; she is the last of a family which was as extravagant as it was distinguished. Othmar may have heard of her father, the last Comte de Valogne; he was a *viveur enragé*, and finished the little that had been left by Count Gui, the hero of Versailles, and the fortune of his wife as well, who was a de Creusac. She died in childbed. Her mother had the care of the child, and he went on with his life of pleasure until he broke his neck riding at La Marche. The old Marquise de Creusac, when she also died, could not leave her granddaughter a farthing. The de Creusac had been ruined in the Revolution, and the sons of the Marquise, who would never have anything to do with their brother-in-law, were both killed in the war of '70. There was no one left but the Duchesse de Vannes, who was a third cousin of de Valogne, to do anything. She took the child in her charge, as I have said, and has behaved admirably, in the letter of charity, if something has been lacking of the spirit. So long as the girl is being educated the thing is easy; but when the time comes when she must leave her convent, as she will have to do in two years' time, the problem will not be so easy of solution; they will have to decide on her future. At present her fate has been easily settled, but soon the terrible question will arise—who will marry her without a dower? I believe they mean to make her enter the religious life, as you said; for the men who probably would marry her for sake of alliance with the de Vannes, will be those with whom the de Vannes would utterly refuse to ally themselves.'

'A convent! Good heavens, for a child like a Greuze picture!' exclaimed Othmar.

Melville added sadly:

'It is a refuge; but myself, I would never have the religious life embraced only for its safety. I never approve of looking at Deity as a superior sort of chaperon. If all the soul be not aspirant of its own accord to a spiritual sacrifice the vows are a mere shibboleth.'

'What soul shrined in a healthy body would aspire to the cloister at sixteen?' thought Othmar, as the Princess said, 'All this is very interesting, Monsignore, but it does not explain how a *protégée* of my neighbours, the high and mighty de Vannes, comes to be rowing in a boat full of oranges.'

'Ah, that I cannot tell you,' said Melville, 'but I believe her foster-mother has a *bastide* near Nice; it may be she is with her

foster-mother now. I knew her well when she was a little child, living with the old Marquise de Creusac in that extreme but refined and reserved poverty of which only the old noblesse has the secret. The Marquise was one of the sweetest and most pious women I have ever had the honour to know; but she could, if necessary, have withered a king into the earth with a glance. The child promised to be like her, but had something *bouillante* and impetuous, which had come to her from her father, and which, beneath her high-bred manner and her chastened tone, made her, as a baby, intensely interesting.'

'Dear Monsignore,' said the Princess, with a little impatience, 'surely you have mistaken your vocation, and should have been a writer of novels; you draw portraits with the skill of Octave Feuillet.'

'I have only said what I have seen,' said Melville, good-humouredly. 'Probably Feuillet only does the same.'

The boat with the oranges had passed ahead towards the shore, its Venetian red side was dipping in the trough of the waves, its old striped sail was swaying in the wind; there was a speck of gold in the sun where the oranges were.

'You had better rescue this distressed damsel and marry her, Othmar!' said the Princess Napraxine, with an unkind little laugh. 'She seems made on purpose for you. She has the unsullied descent which you are always sighing for, and you certainly can dispense with a dot.'

For answer he only looked at her; but she understood his answer.

Melville vaguely understood also that in his innocent praises of his Cinderella he had unwittingly struck a false chord, and he was too much a man of the world not to be grieved at his involuntary failure in tact. The boat meanwhile was fast growing to a mere speck of red and yellow colour, soon to be wholly lost in the blue radiance of sea and sky.

'You have at times bought some Greuzes, if I remember,' continued the Princess. 'They are pretty, soft, conventional, but I do not know that your gallery is much the richer for them.'

'They belong to another time than ours,' said Othmar. 'I imagine Talleyrand was right when he said that no one born since '89 can know how sweet human life can become.'

'And how elegant human manners can be,' added Melville. 'Cendrillon has something of that old grace; when she was two years old she curtseyed as though she were Sevigné's self.'

'What a paragon!' said Madame Napraxine. 'Poverty and all the Graces! An irresistible combination. The time I should have liked to live in would have been Louis Treize's; what perfect costume, what picturesque wars, what admirable architecture! Is this child at Sacré Cœur, did you say, Monsignore?'

'That would be too extravagant for her place as Cendrillon,'

replied Melville. 'No; I think they were wise not to put her amidst all those great ladies in embryo; she has been educated by the Dames de Ste. Anne, at a remote village called Faïël in the Morbihan. She has had a pale girlhood there, like the arum-lily that blossoms under the moss-grown oaks.'

'How poetic you are!' said the Princess Napraxine, with a smile which brought a flush of embarrassment even to the world-bronzed cheek of Melville. 'Men are so much more romantic than women. Here are Clotilde de Vannes and I, who only see that, as this young girl has no dower, the very best place for her in the world is a convent, melancholy but inevitable; whereas you and Othmar, merely because she has pretty hair which the sun shines on as she goes past amongst her oranges, and already thinking that some one ought to rise out of the sea to marry her, with a duke's *couronne* in one hand and a veil of old d'Alençon lace in the other! Certainly those things do happen. If she were an impudent *écuyère* at Hengler's, or a Californian who never had a grandfather, the duke's *couronne* would no doubt appear on her horizon. By the way, pending her eternal retreat, does Cri-Cri allow her to be seen at all?'

'You will probably see her at Millo. I saw her there last week, and made her cry by reminding her of her babyhood on the isle; and of her grandmother, whom she adored. She is with the Duchesse now, because there is typhus fever at the convent, and the pupils are all dispersed; but Millo is scarcely a congenial air for a poor relation, who is also a proud one.'

'Ah! she is a good advertisement of Cri-Cri's virtues, *elle en a besoin*,' said the Princess Napraxine, with her merciless little laugh. 'And de Vannes, what does he say to so pretty a relative?'

'A man like de Vannes never sees that a young girl of that type exists.'

'Hum—m—mph!' she murmured dubiously. 'That depends on a great many circumstances. Propinquity and *ennui* will make Ste. Scholastique herself sought like the Krauss or Jeanne Granier. Millo is certainly a very odd kind of a home for your woodland arum-lily. If she have any intelligence at all, and relate what she sees when she gets back to Faïel, the good Dames de Ste. Anne will have the monastic enjoyment of scandal gratified to the uttermost.'

'I believe she lives entirely in the school-room whilst at Millo,' said Melville, a little impatiently. He wished he had never spoken the name of Yseulte de Valogne, the name which seemed to belong to *le temps quand la Reine Berthe fila*. He had one of those instincts of having spoken unwisely, one of those presentiments of impending disaster, which come to finely-organised and much-experienced minds, and are called by blunter and slower brains mere nervous nonsense.

When the other day the tall factory chimney fell at Bradford

the birds which built in it had flown away before the workmen—stupidly eating their breakfasts till the bricks tumbled about their ears—had looked up and seen any danger.

CHAPTER V.

As Othmar leaned against the side of the yacht and let his eyes dwell on her face, unseen by him so long, his regard let something of the emotion which he felt escape him, and betrayed that the chill indifference with which he had met her again had been but the mere mask of pride, though it might be a mask which he would be strong enough always to wear in her presence.

'Yonder is S. Pharamond,' he said, conscious of his momentary loss of self-control, as he pointed to some round towers which rose above woods of ilex trees and magnolias. 'If you would allow them to land me there instead of at Nice I should be grateful, and perhaps you would honour me with landing too: the house is somewhat neglected, as I have been away so long; but they will be at least able to give you a cup of tea.'

'With pleasure, if Wilkes likes it,' said the Princess, as she joined her friend. 'I never knew you had a place upon this coast; surely you never named it when—when I knew you first?'

'Most likely not,' said Othmar, 'I have been seldom there. It was a favourite house of my father's in his rare moments of leisure, but I have never cared for the air or for the world of Nice. I have lent it sometimes to my friends.'

'What do you not lend to your friends? In that respect you have made yourself honey, and the flies have eaten you without hesitation.'

'If the honey be not in the hive it ought to be eaten. There is a landing-place in my grounds, and the house is not more than a quarter of a mile distant, if such a distance do not alarm you. I know that you are no great pedestrian, Princess.'

'Why should one be when there are so many more agreeable modes of progression? *On ne doit jamais se punir pour rien.*'

'I have walked twenty miles for my own pleasure very often,' said Lady Brancepeth, who approached them.

'Oh, but you are English; we were just saying that all English people are like beavers, you must be sewing and drilling and building and dragging something or other all through the length of your days. I could walk, I think I could walk right across Russia, if there were any wise object to be obtained by it, but simply to walk, as a mad dog runs, from a sort of blind impulsion!—no, that is beyond me.'

'You are such a curious union, Nadine, of languor and energy, of indifference and of potentialities,' began her friend.

'My energy is latent,' she said, interrupting her. 'I do not waste it on everyday trifles, as you waste yours. You always use forty-horse power to boil an egg or make a box of wax matches. That is an English idea of energy.'

'Your grandmother, the Princesse d'Yssingeaux, was English by birth.'

'So was Othmar's mother. That is why he and I have something of the beaver in us, but calmed, controlled, kept in reserve; we do not waste our time and timber damming up threads of water, but we shall be ready if an inundation occur.'

'Othmar, perhaps,' said Lady Brancepeth.

'I have a great deal more energy than he,' said Nadine Napraxine, with a smile, as she leaned back in the wicker lounging-chair, looking as indolent as a Turkish woman, and as delicate and useless as a painted butterfly.

The schooner in twenty minutes' time landed them at a creek, with a little marble quay, shadowed by great pines and eucalyptus trees; there was a pavilion on the small pier, a pretty kiosque all white and blue and gold, with twisted pillars and Moorish arabesques.

'Remember, nothing here is of my taste or choice,' said Othmar; 'I have not been at the place for ten years. Would you like to rest? They can bring your tea to you; or would you come up to the house at once?'

'*Va pour le château,*' said Nadine Napraxine; 'I never care for the preface of a story.'

'I fear you will find it a dull story,' said he, as they left the quay and passed up a steep path, always under the shadow of the trees.

'What a misfortune for him that he inherited so much! It prevents him enjoying anything,' she said to Melville; who replied, a little drily:

'I do not think it is what he inherited which prevents his enjoyment, Princess; it is more probably what he encountered and sighed for vainly. Life holds many of these ironies.'

'If I were he,' she continued, ignoring the reply, 'I should care for nothing but that power which he, in common with other great capitalists, possesses. To be able to make a war possible or impossible by the mere inclining of your wand of gold—that must be the most interesting of all possible kinds of influence.'

'Yes, the financier is the modern Merlin, but then there is Vivien——'

'In Mr. Tennyson's poem, not out of it,' said Princess Nadine, sceptically; but she knew very well that Vivien was then walking under the shade of her own great red parasol, with its group of humming-birds embroidered on its left side.

The pathway ascended steeply through the woods, bordered with datura and geranium, which were still blossoming gaily; here and there was a wooden bench, a majolica seat, a little statue; the ground was of shining shingle; it had been kept in perfect order, awaiting its owner, for ten years. After about a quarter of a mile it ended on a level space of the red rock up which it had climbed. Here had been laid out a fairy-like and fantastic garden, lawns, palms, fountains, walls of shrubs, and groves of camellias and azaleas, spreading before a château, which was, in architecture, a miniature Maintenon, and in position stood high enough to look over the sea in front of it.

'What a delicious place!' said Nadine; 'and in a month or two, when all those azaleas flower—if I had known you had owned such a bijou, I would have told you to lend it to us. It makes La Jacquemerille a mere trumpery toy.'

'I would lend you nothing,' said Othmar, in her ear; 'I would have given you everything—once.'

Then he added aloud, 'This is somewhat trumpery also, I fear; modern things are so apt to have that look. They are like the *articles de Paris*, which cost enormously, but are only plush and ormolu after all. However, Viollet le Duc built this house; so it may be a little better than its neighbours. Only I should like statelier and simpler gardens myself; I should like high box hedges and old-fashioned plants. But I suppose they would not go with the Mediterranean.'

'You like anything simple and homely; you will have to marry Margot, or Phœbe, or Grethel, off a farm,' said the Princess, with some contempt. She was a hothouse flower herself, and despised thyme and dog-roses.

'I might do worse,' said Othmar, as he ushered them into the house, which contained some wonderful china, some admirable modern pictures, some fine statuary, and more French luxury than its master cared to have surround him.

'It is exquisite,' said the Princess, after wandering through it, and returning to a room opening on the gardens; a room hung with tawny plush, embroidered with white roses and blue irises. The chairs and couches matched the walls, a gilt cornice ran round the oval ceiling, which was painted *in tempera* with the story of Undine. 'How many more houses have you, Othmar, standing like so many open empty caskets waiting for you to put the jewel of life into them? Really, how many have you? Come, tell me!'

'I have too many,' said Othmar. 'But excess always carries its own retribution; amongst them all I have no home; none that I feel home-like. I can imagine what it is—a *chez soi* that one cares about and desires to return to—but I do not possess it.'

'Make it,' said Melville; 'that is always in the power of every man who is not a priest.'

'I suppose it is,' said Othmar. 'But it has never seemed very

easy to me. The fire of the hearth is like the coal from the altar: it comes from heaven, and can scarcely be commanded.'

He glanced as he spoke at Nadine Napraxine, who was lying back against the golden gleams of the plush of her couch; she had a tea-rose in her hand which she had plucked from the gardens. She looked dream-like and ethereal. She had on her lips that little smile which meant so much and yet said nothing, and was half compassion and half disdain, and partially, also, amusement. If she had been mistress here and in all his other houses, he thought, each one of them would have been Eden to him. But that had not been Melville's meaning.

At that moment his servants brought in the tea noiselessly and quickly: little Saxe cups, frosted cakes, forced strawberries, appearing on great old plateaux of gold—as though he had been served there every day instead of having been absent ten years.

'Really, Othmar, you have a little of the Haroun al Raschid, though you do not care for your throne,' said Melville; 'who would have imagined that, returning from Asia last night, you would have tea all ready made for your friends?'

'My friends reconcile me to my house,' said Othmar; 'you will leave almost a perfume of home behind you; these rooms will seem lonely no more.'

'The rooms are quite perfect,' said Princess Nadine, 'but still I think we will have our tea out of doors; the sun is still brilliant. We have now and then little fits of rurality; when we have those we sit on a terrace and take tea; that is as near rusticity as we care to go.'

She walked through one of the doorways into the air as she spoke.

To Othmar the golden-coloured room with its white roses and blue irises seemed to grow dark as she left it.

As she passed out to the gardens his people brought him a note; it was inside a silver-grey envelope, with a silver *couronne* upon it, and on a silver-grey card was written a very pressingly worded invitation to dinner the following night with his neighbours the Duc and Duchesse de Vannes. They had just heard of his arrival; they would have a few people; they begged him not to be formal, &c., &c. The château nearest to him was Millo, their favourite winter retreat: a gorgeous and fantastic place, with many a gilded cupola and shining dome which caught the sunshine from the sea, amidst groves of magnolia and woods of ilex. He had not been to Millo for ten years. When he had been last there the Duc had been just married to a famous beauty, and he had known them very well in Paris ever since that time. They were not people for whom he cared much; Alain de Vannes was a sporting man, and his wife was one of the leaders of fashion, with half a hundred lovers given to her, rightly or wrongly, by report. They were, however, Legitimist in politics to the back-

bone. Neither of their families had ever pandered to Emperor or Elysée, and they were, despite their easy morals and their profound indifference to each other, exceedingly exclusive, and, with all their nonchalance, even arrogant.

'It must be a strange house for that poor little girl,' he thought as he threw the card aside, and remembered the Greuze face in the Venetian red boat. Millo was not more than a mile off him, at one point their woods and his joined, and looking from his terrace any day he could see the gilded minarets and the varicoloured tiles of their villas shining in the light against billows of dark evergreen foliage.

'How soon they know you are here!' said Nadine Napraxine, as he spoke of the invitation to her. 'You will go, of course; you cannot have any engagements?'

'Will you be there?'

'I do not know; yes, perhaps. I never make up my mind until the last hour. People say it is cruel when they have dinners; it leaves a place blank; but how can you be sure what you wish to do until the moment comes? I detest dinners. When we have really become civilised we shall each of us eat in solitude, or, at the least, each behind his own screen. Why should one of the unloveliest of the operations of nature be performed in public. The flowers, and the plate, and the footmen cannot really embellish it; indeed, they only make it the more grotesque.'

'How droll you are, Nadine!' said Lady Brancepeth. 'You have certainly a monopoly of singular ideas.'

'I wish my ideas were general,' answered the Princess. 'When the world has really refined itself it will look on our eating in society as we look now on savages eating with their fingers. Some of our friends cannot even have a little love affair but they must go and eat prawns, and quails, and *petits fours* together in a café; and if a hero comes home from a war anywhere his countrymen at once make him eat and drink in public by way of showing their respect for him. The whole thing is absurd. The only creature that is not offensive when it eats is a bird. Just one little dive in a rose, or under a vine-leaf, and it has breakfasted. But we!——'

'When a very pretty woman eats a strawberry, the bird is not very much her superior,' murmured Melville.

'Reverend father,' said the Princess, 'you have no business to know whether one is pretty or not. Fruit, perhaps, does keep something of the golden age about it; but our dinners!—were I a man I would never see the woman I admired taking her share of diseased livers, tortured fish, slaughtered songsters. They are fond of writing nowadays about a higher humanity which will succeed to ours; but my idea of it would be that it should be fed like Fénelon's islanders by only breathing sweet odours. That would be even better than the bird's dip in the rose.'

'Then you will not go to Millo?' persisted Othmar.

'Who knows what one may do in twenty-four hours?'

The servants had carried the gold trays out into the garden after her. Melville and Lady Brancepeth, who were more comfortable in the embrace of their plush couches, returned within-doors; Othmar drew his chair nearer to hers, and offered her a cigarette.

'Rurality always wants this consolation, Princess,' he said, as he did so.

'Thanks: not till I have finished my strawberries. They are delicious. How do you manage your households? If we go home unexpectedly anywhere we always find the servants away, the major-domo drunk, the house topsy-turvy, and not a thing to eat within twenty miles. How did you keep them at this point of perfection?'

'They are never sure that I may not arrive at any moment. If servants be not ready at any hour of the day or night they are not worth their salt. Then I have very faithful stewards——'

'One marvel does not explain another. The fidelity is perhaps more astonishing than the perpetual readiness!'

'I reward fidelity; most people limit themselves to accepting it. If you do not pay your servant well he will help himself.'

'I am sure we pay—pay endlessly. Platon spends Heaven knows what on the servants, but he gets only a mob of rogues, who rob him right and left.'

'I have no right to suppose the Prince less wise than myself; but perhaps there is other payment as well as money in which he does not deal. I let the humblest man in my service have plenty of hope; there is no moral tonic so bracing; each of them knows that he may rise if he only deserve it. Then, again, I am heedful to have my house-stewards men of high character; a house-steward is one's viceroy—one cannot be too careful in choosing him.'

'I should never have supposed you cared about those things, Othmar,' she said, in much surprise, as she stared at him, a strawberry held uneaten against her lips.

'One must think about them or be at war with one's conscience,' he answered. 'That is the tedium of life; its duties are so inexorable and so wearisome.'

'Is an easy conscience absolutely necessary to you?'

'No; I could easily imagine circumstances under which a guilty one would make me carry it lightly.'

A gleam of the old passionate emotion which she had once known in him passed for a moment into his eyes with gloom and fire mingled. He repressed it; he did not wish her to believe that she had still the power over his life which she actually possessed. He heard her voice saying always: 'I will have no melodramatic passions to disturb me; they are absurd, they are out of date, they are tiresome.'

And she had said it out of no virtue, only out of sheer shallowness and indifference.

'That is a very shocking sentiment,' she said demurely now, as she ate another strawberry. 'At least, one is bound to say so; Monsignore in there would certainly say so. Indeed, from Monsignore's point of view, one would certainly think it so; but as all we modern people, whatever church we ostensibly belong to, are all so completely of one mind that we know we are only automata, made up of nerve-centres and different gases, I do not see why we should necessarily have consciences at all, do you? Why should we have one any more than the zostera from which I named that yacht?'

'Only because the zosteræ have no traditions of a conscience, all men have.'

'All men? Savages have not, primitive races have not; and how should we know whether the zostera has or has not? She may have a very perfect system of ethics, sitting on her rocks in reach of the tide—I should think, indeed, she had a sort of Buddhism.'

'You named that yacht?' he said abruptly.

'Yes; Geraldine had her built last year. He is not like you; he has not a superstition that one is bound to go on sailing in the same ship all one's life, however old-fashioned she may grow.'

'Lord Geraldine has many superiorities over me. He has the patience to play at Platonic cicisbeism as children play for counters,' said Othmar, with a brusque contempt.

'That is neither a well-bred speech nor a true one,' said Nadine Napraxine very calmly, as she set down her cup.

'Its breeding I cannot defend, its truth I do,' he answered coldly. 'There are men who can spend their lives carrying a woman's fan, and ask for nothing more at her hands; they have merits, no doubt, but they are not those which I appreciate.'

'Poor Ralph! if he heard you!' she said, with a little yawn which she could not control, though she tried to stifle it with a cigarette. 'He thinks himself far more manly than you because he shoots fur and feather, and you do not kill anything—except a man now and then!'

'I may yet add to the list of the latter,' said Othmar.

'The Mongolians have made you very savage,' she said, as she lighted the cigarette. 'And you used to be so gentle.'

'I used to be many things that I have ceased to be since the twentieth of April, a year and eight months ago,' said Othmar.

She had forgotten the date which he remembered so accurately, the date of the day on which they had parted in her own room in Paris, with the smell of the lilac of the avenue coming in through the open windows, and the sunset rays, as they came through the rose-coloured blinds, touching her fair face, and the curl of her long dark lashes, and the beautiful mouth, with the little, cruel,

languid smile on it, as she had said, 'I will have no melodramatic passions to disturb me.'

She looked at him now with the demure un-selfconsciousness of a child.

'Ah! I never could remember dates,' she murmured. 'I was the despair of all my governesses, I had such a bad memory.'

'It is convenient sometimes,' said Othmar, a little bitterly. Why were all those past hours written on his remembrance as the chisel writes on stone, while she had shaken off their memories as the bird shakes a summer rain off its wings?

'And how,' he added with an effort, 'with such a defective brain as you describe, have you become one of the most cultured women of Europe? Does forgetfulness of—dates—enhance the power of acquiring other knowledge?'

'I think it leaves the brain freer,' she answered, in that serene way which she had with her when she was intending that a man should never forget her whatever she might choose to forget.

'No doubt,' he said impatiently. 'No doubt learned women have never been very tender ones.'

'Learned! what a terrific word. Would you call a mere poor frivolous *mondaine* like me by the same word that described Lady Jane Grey and Mrs. Somerville? I know a few languages; I had *bonnes* of every nation when I was a baby; and I have read Schopenhauer and Herbert Spencer, and I assure you that one bored me as much as the other. But learned! would a *bas bleu* eat your strawberries or smoke your cigarettes?'

'Or take all my heart and my soul out of me?' he thought, as he answered, 'No; certainly your one great science, Madame, was never learned either in the nursery or out of Schopenhauer and Herbert Spencer. It is the perfection of high art; and you, like all supreme artists, cannot pause to remember what your studies may cost to your subjects.'

She did not ask him what art or science he meant; she lighted a second cigarette, and said, in her sweetest voice, 'I do not think you are quite so even-tempered as you used to be, Count Othmar. Look, the sun is low; it is time to be going homeward. What are Monsignore and Evelyn doing? Will you call them, please?'

'Stay yet a little while: I have not seen you for so long,' he murmured, ashamed and irritated at his own weakness in letting the words escape him.

'Naturally you have not,' she said, with a gay laugh, 'since you have been in Asia and I in Europe. Why did you go to Asia? People do not do that sort of thing nowadays. If they be annoyed they walk down to their club and play hard, or they ride a horse at a steeplechase, and in a week they think no more about it. And why did you have that duel with de Sénélac? It was very imprudent. I had told you I could not bear that kind of melodrama. Nobody knew, certainly, but that was only because

they were all stupid; anyone might have known. And Sénélac never left his bed for six months; and have you heard that he will limp, they say, for ever?'

Othmar, with a gesture, intimated that the misfortune of his late adversary was a matter of utter indifference.

'If you be sorry that he limps,' he said impatiently, 'be sorry that you gave him your bouquet to carry. Princess, you are very fond of psychological studies, but you do not like to be reminded of what others pay for them. You know well enough what men suffer for you, and through you, but you do not choose ever to blame yourself for making them do so. The world has not changed; the mode of expression may have altered, but men feel as they felt in the days of David or of Æschylus. Love is what it was then, a mere passing pleasure or pain to many, but to some the herald of heaven or of hell, the begetter of heroism or of crime.'

'My dear Othmar, pray excuse me,' said Nadine Napraxine; 'you talk beautifully, you always did, but I cannot stay to hear you when the sun is just going down, and we have only a yacht that crawls to take us home to dinner. It is my fault that it crawls: he would have had a steam one if I had not prevented him. I detest smoke and machinery, but still certainly without them one crawls. Monsignore, will you come if you have finished talking about the Little Sisters of the Poor?'

Othmar's face grew cold, a sombre displeasure darkened his eyes, he drew back and let Melville join Madame Napraxine. He himself walked beside her friend down the path through the woods talking, but not sensible of what he said, watching the red sunshade with its embroidered humming-birds pass before him under the boughs.

As they neared the quay he took from the hands of one of his men two bouquets of gardenias and orchids, and offered them to the two ladies; they were in pretty cornucopiæ of silvered wicker-work. Anyone would have thought that there had been the preparation of a week for this afternoon visit.

'You are *bon prince*,' said Madame Napraxine as she took her orchids, 'why will you pretend to be a barbarian? The little graceful amenities of the world become you, and you do them so well, though you do them so seldom; why will you make yourself *un homme de foyer—manqué*? It is much nicer,' she added in a low murmur, 'to give me a bouquet than to shoot another man for carrying one.'

He did not answer. Her jests jarred on him.

When they reached the quay the sun was setting, the boat was waiting, the sailors immovable, their oars held straight in the air.

'Adieu, Othmar!' said the Princess Nadine gaily. 'Your château is marvellous, your orchids are exquisite, and your tea was enchanting; we will leave you all alone in your poetic solitude.

and when you want prose and society you will come to La Jacquemerille.'

'Will you not honour me again?' he said, angry at his own weakness. 'Would you not dine with me to-morrow night? Or the day after to-morrow? I think the Prince would come.'

'Oh! Platon would come certainly,' said Nadine Napraxine, with a smile; 'you are his especial friend. He shall come to you alone; then you can talk to him as much as you like about the burning of Moscow and—and—all those other dates for which you have so admirable a memory!'

She would say no more than that, and her musical slight laugh tantalised his ear as the boat pushed off in the deep blue water, and the seamen bent above their oars.

Otho Othmar leaned against the marble balustrade and watched them row away towards the schooner, with an anger in which vain regrets and baffled desires were mingled disconsolately. He remained there till the sun was gone down, and the white canvas of the yacht had passed out of sight round a bend of the shore.

When he retraced his steps to his solitary house, he saw a tea-rose lying beside the gilded garden chair which she had occupied as she ate her strawberries. It was the one which she had gathered and dropped. He picked it up and put it in his coat.

'*Quand on aime on n'a que vingt ans*,' he thought with scorn for himself.

He entered the golden drawing-room, wrote a formal note of invitation to the Prince and Princess Napraxine, and said to one of his servants, 'Send a messenger over with this letter the first thing in the morning to the villa that is called La Jacquemerille.' Yet he had come from Asia with the firm resolve to show the Princess Napraxine that he had conquered all passion for her; and he was not on the whole a weak man.

CHAPTER VI.

He dined alone; a few telegrams would have filled his rooms, but he did not care for society, which he thought only came to him because he was one of the few owners of milliards in Europe. He sat alone after dinner in the salon which she had admired, with the light of half a hundred wax candles bringing out the golden gleams in the plush, the colours of the embroidered irises, the dead gold of the cornice and panels, while a fire of olive wood glowed under the carvings of the mantelpiece of porphyry. The plush curtains, with the lace beneath them, veiled the shuttered windows; outside the night was calm, there was no sound anywhere. The words of Melville came back to him as he sat there in the

midst of the luxury and of the loneliness: 'To make a home is in the power of any man who is not a priest.'

It did not seem to him to lie in his. He could have bought a principality, but he could not buy a home. Love alone could create that, and the only woman he had loved for years was Nadine Napraxine.

If she had been what he wished to him, would she have made him this ideal home—she, capricious, indifferent, disdainful, *mondaine*, as she had said, in every habit, thought, and attitude of her life? Perhaps not; probably not, he knew; yet she alone would have had power to make a melody out of the discords of his desires and his discontent; she alone seemed to him to fill the vacant places, to smile across the solitary room, to have left the lingering perfume of her presence there, as the orange flowers left their fragrance in the cabinet in which they were laid for a moment.

Otho Othmar was one of the richest men in Europe; he was often disposed to regret it, as many persons regret that to which they have been born. He did not think it a thing to be vain of; he was even occasionally ashamed of it. It seemed to him that when you were so much richer than most of your fellows you were required to be very much better than they; and it is not always agreeable, nor often easy, to be so. When he signed 'Othmar' it was as when an emperor signs his name, and with a stroke of the pen he could give away millions with as much ease as lesser mortals can scatter pence. This facility was no pleasure to him. Though he was well aware that riches are the one ruling power of the modern world, and comprise in themselves the wishing cap and the magician's wand, Excalibur and Holy Grail, he did not greatly prize his possession of them; perhaps because they had been always before him and about him in profusion from his birth.

The Othmar fortune had been steadily growing for a century and a half. At the commencement Marc Othmar, a Croat, native of Agram, had been a poor man enough—a horse dealer, some said a horse stealer—what precisely never was known. Agram is not a very greatly frequented place, and records get easily mildewed and dim in it. Whether he began life as pedlar, or peasant, or, as some affirmed, as a robber of wild colts, Marc Othmar at forty years old was a money-lender, commission agent, and banker, and at sixty had become a millionaire, known of far beyond Croatia, and had laid the foundations of one of the great financial houses of Eastern Europe.

His son quadrupled his possessions and extended his operations westward and northward. His grandson fell upon the hard times of the Napoleonic wars as on a bed of roses; and from the misfortunes of Austria and Prussia, and the necessities of Pitt's England, made gold as rapidly as though he had had the philosopher's stone in a crucible. He grew into a very colossus of

riches, and his houses did their business in Vienna, Paris, London, and Frankfort. He married the daughter of a French duke, and made his central house of business in Paris.

His eldest son Stefan, who inherited all his astuteness, succeeded him in due course in the direction of affairs, ably seconded by his brother Friederich, and in his turn married the daughter of an English nobleman, by whom he had one son, Otho, who was chiefly educated in England, and who had little or nothing of the Othmar type in feature or in character.

He was a boy of infinite promise, and of no ordinary mind, but, despite his personal and intellectual gifts, he was a bitter disappointment to his father; and the indifference, which at times deepened into contempt, with which the lad reviewed the origin and the employment of the fortunes of his house seemed to him nothing short of blasphemy. Stefan Othmar himself was a man of excessive arrogance, but it was a *bourgeois* arrogance, proud of its own sources and dominion, and capable of infinite self-abasement in the pursuit of self-interest. That his boy should revolt against his descent and despise the future before him was a fact so hideous and so amazing in his sight that, had he not known his dead wife to have been the purest and coldest of women, he would almost have doubted that his own blood ran in the veins of his degenerate heir.

As Otho grew towards manhood the distance between them widened more and more. That a fastidious fine gentleman, a fantastic and futile dreamer, a mere visionary and dilettante, should be the outcome of a hundred and fifty years of financial success and ambition seemed to Count Stefan so frightful a mockery of fortune, that he cursed his own folly in having wedded a patrician, instead of some woman of a common but ambitious stock who would have given him successors content, and solely content, with the superb position of princes of finance, and capable of doubling and quadrupling those many millions which were his own ecstasy. The very virtues of his son alarmed him as hardly any vices would have done. The youth was so delicate of mind and taste, so devout and chaste of habit, so meditative and so solitary by choice, that his father grew alarmed lest he should actually do what he at times threatened, and consecrate himself to the Catholic priesthood. He took a violent remedy.

He went to one of the most seductive and most venal women of the day, and said to her, 'Win this boy from his dreams or he will become a monk.'

She undertook the mission, and succeeded in it. She destroyed all that was spiritual and innocent in him with the merciless witchery of the courtesan, which is like the tide of burning lava: no grass will spring where the scoria has spread. He awoke in her arms without a faith. He never again dreamed of the religious life. She earned well the estate in Franche-Comté and

the large sum in rouleaux which his father settled on her; but nothing in after-life could ever give him back those heavenward aspirations, that purity of soul, which she had swept away as with a wave of fire. Like the young Reichstadt before him, he had wasted all the splendour and innocence of a first passion on a wanton who had betrayed him for gold. The first passion of a boy colours all his future; the bitter-sweet flavour of this remained with him through all his later years. Love without it was tasteless; love with it was worthless. He said once to his father: 'You had better have killed me than have given me to Sara Vernon.'

'Who passes by the gates of disillusion has died twice.' His father had pushed him with a hard hand through those gates, believing that they led to the path of self-knowledge and of empire over men. Stefan Othmar had not wanted a poet, a scholar, a philanthropist, or a priest for his successor; he had wanted a cold-hearted, clear-headed, unscrupulous, unyielding financier to hold, and even to increase, the mighty powers and possessions of which the name of Othmar was a symbol to the world.

But the crime he had committed did not obtain for him what he desired. The merciless cynicism with which he had destroyed the faith and the purity of his son did not insure its object. The youth remained as aloof in mind from the traditions of his house, and as disdainful in spirit of them, as he had been before. He consented, indeed, with apathy, to put his signature to the deeds which made him one of the chiefs of the house, but that was all which Stefan Othmar gained by his son's immeasurable loss. Some four years later, when Otho was two-and-twenty years of age, Stefan Othmar died suddenly on the steps of his great hotel in the Boulevard St.-Germain, as he was ascending them after an audience at the Tuileries, in which he had been the master of the situation, and Napoléon Trois the suppliant. He died of fulminant apoplexy, without an instant's warning; but his affairs were left in the most perfect order. His brother Fritz remained, who had been his *alter ego* all his life, and nothing was altered in the House of Othmar, of which his son became supreme master.

The young man received the news far away in the forest recesses of Lahore, at the court of an Indian prince, where he was being feasted with royal honours in the course of his travels over the world. There had been no sympathy between his father and himself; their temperaments had been as opposite as the poles; little sentiment of personal affection mingled with his sudden consciousness that he was absolute lord of his own destinies. His first impulse was to use the power into which he had entered to destroy, at a blow, all that his forefathers had been a century and a half in building up for him. 'It is a mass of corruption; it shall perish,' he said to himself, with the ruthless integrity, the unsparing fanaticism, of a generous and high-souled youth. But when he returned

to England and came face to face with all his responsibilities and powers, he found that which he had though so easy was quite impossible to accomplish as he desired to accomplish it. His first impulse was to throw the whole into liquidation and efface the House of Othmar from financial existence for ever. But to do so was but a dream; the financial world would not have released him from his obligations; his only living relative, his father's brother and partner, Baron Friederich Othmar, stoutly refused to suffer that to be done which would, in his sight, have been a greater crime than many murders.

Against his desires and against his conscience, he had, on reaching his majority, been half-persuaded, half-coerced, by his father to associate himself in legal form with the house. The act had been one of filial sacrifice, and it hung like a wallet of stones about his neck. He found that his power had its limits; that he could no more disengage himself from all the operations and engagements of his firm than a young king can emancipate himself from the trammels of court and constitution. He had a right to ruin himself, but he had no right to ruin all those whose fortunes were interwoven with the enterprises of his predecessors. Irritated and disappointed he resigned himself to the inevitable, and remained the 'master of milliards,' with as much regret as the young Francis Joseph accepted the diadem of Austria. The cloth of gold in which they, his forefathers, had wrapped him remained upon him, and sometimes he thought it a very shirt of Nessus.

Sometimes he was almost tempted to take the vow of poverty for the sake of getting rid of it, but he was restrained by two recollections—one that he had no spiritual faith, the other that mankind in general would have voted him insane. A profound melancholy, without any definite or special cause, grew upon him; he felt the sense of an immense responsibility, which he saw no manner of using with proportionate usefulness. The sophism that duties unsought may be disregarded did not satisfy his conscience, whilst his knowledge of the world told him that to do harm is as easy as to kiss your hand, whilst to effect any great good is as hard as to move the mountains from their bases. Public charity only fills the pockets of greedy speculators; private charity too often raises up a festering mass of imposture. The rich man goes through the world as a sheep through briars in spring time. If he be a perfect egotist, he is happy enough; if he have thought and feeling, he is depressed by the universal greed around him, and by the absolute impotence of all religions to bridle it.

Otho Othmar remained always sensible of a bitter irritation and degradation whenever he recalled the sources of the wealth he enjoyed: the ruin of prosperous countries, the wholesale slaughter of wars, the distress or disgrace of ancient nobilities, the impoverishment of nations. True, there was another side to the throne of Plutus, on which his fathers had seated themselves; by their means,

No doubt, enterprises had been carried out for which humanity, on the whole, was materially, if not spiritually, the better. Canals, deserts, mines, cities, colonies, ocean-ways, had felt the vivifying powers of the great Othmar loans; but the evil appeared to him far to out-balance the good, and all the wealth seemed to him tainted. He had considerable pride, in a shape with which men would not have sympathised. He fancied that the inherited nobility of his French and English blood was always at war with the blood of the Croat bankers by whom he had been begotten. Though his position was one which almost all the world envied, it was one which galled himself. Titles had been offered him, but he had contemptuously rejected them. He was Othmar; the name spoke to all the ears of Europe; he did not consider that the story it told could be either changed or buried by smothering it underneath the blaze of some princeship or dukedom. He did not even call himself, as others called him, Count Othmar, and he put neither coronet or escutcheon on his carriages, his plate, or his writing-paper. He was far too proud to be proud in that way.

Illustrious alliances had been proposed to him, but he had rejected all; the world expected him to marry greatly, but he remained the hope and the despair of all the European nobilities, who would have willingly accorded him any one of their fair virgins. Their eagerness had early given him a cynical disdain for the aristocracies to which his tastes attracted him; he had no less a disdain for the financial order to which tradition allied him. On the whole, although he had never had any special sorrow, he was scarcely a happy man, though the whole world was ready to gratify and amuse him. He had been always able to indulge his fancies to the uttermost, but all the venal beauty which affected adoration for him left his heart cold.

Though gentle in manner and chary of speech, he could on provocation say caustic truths which cut like surgeons' knives. In general, however, he was indulgent to follies which he did not share. He lived always a little apart from the world in which he was so conspicuous a figure, and he judged it with good nature rather than with sympathy.

Occasionally, as Nadine Napraxine had said, *il voyait en jaune*; the bitterness of spirit which comes over all who see themselves sought for what they possess passed over him also, but its pessimism never lasted long. That human nature was trivial but not evil was, on the whole, the result of his experiences.

By one of the odd caprices in which destiny delights, a lettered ease would have been the utmost he would have cared to command. The incessant demands which a great fortune always brings upon its possessor were to him irksome; wherever he went mankind pursued him hat in hand and hand outstretched. He could arrive nowhere without petitions and invitations raining in on him; obscurity was not to be enjoyed even in Mongolia, where the Foreign

Ministers at the Chinese Court and the Celestial Emperor himself sent mounted messengers after him to see that he came to no harm. The interest everywhere excited by his arrival or by his actions irritated him perpetually; the impossibility of securing privacy, to him formed the gravest of annoyances. His intolerance of publicity made him almost detest the whole human race which combined to refuse it to him. To be compelled to live in a glass-house appeared to him to destroy the very first requisite for life's enjoyment. He concealed this sensitiveness under a chilliness of manner which did injustice to the real warmth of his sympathies. There was much that was at once attractive and irritating to women in this young man whose fortunes were so immense and power so extended, who yet passed through the world with so unaffected an indifference to his own advantages in it, and who had the melancholy and romantic features of a Ruy Blas or of a Rolla. With men, his perfect simplicity of expression, his unpretentious courage, and his unfailing generosity, commanded respect, whilst his position excited their envy; but while he compelled their esteem, he did not, as a rule, possess their attachment. 'If we are in a position to serve men greatly, we shall never be greatly loved by them,' said Melville to him once; 'we shall make too many ingrates, even though we do our best not to make one. Men, as a rule, love most what they can afford a little to despise, and have no cause whatever to envy. Do you remember when the anarchists of '48 came to old Rothschild at Ferrières and demanded his fortune for the people of France, and he very quietly took up his pen and made aloud his calculation that his fortune divided thus would give everyone just four francs and a half each? Well, the fault of the very rich man to the world is always Rothschild's to the anarchists; everyone expects he can bestow on each of them ten millions, whilst he can only really give four francs and a half. The calculation may be as clear as day, but the fact is one never forgiven.'

Othmar understood that very well with his reason, but he was not reconciled to it in his heart; he would have desired something different. The immense hotel which his father had built, with its ceilings painted by Ingres and Delaroche, its gardens sloping to the Seine, its genuine treasures of art, its double staircase, its *cour d'honneur*, its stables built on the model of Chantilly, was no better than a barn to him; he detested it with a sort of petulance; he never willingly resided in it. Its network of communication with the banks and the bureaux, laid with all the facilities which modern science could invent, had no interest for him. He did not feel the slightest emotion about any public event that could possibly happen, whether wars and rumours of wars, or the betting of a race-course. He had none of those tastes which may make a rich man popular for a season and ruined in a twelvemonth. To his mistresses he was invariably generous, but these extravagances scarcely made more impression on his vast fortune than a few

pailsfull taken from the sea make diminution in its volume. His greatest pleasure, on which he spent his money most largely, was music. Wherever he was he gathered great singers and musicians around him. She had likened him to Ludwig of Bavaria. His caprices were not quite so eccentric, but his preference was almost as ungrudgingly indulged. He had studied music theoretically and profoundly, though he had never touched any instrument and had never written a bar. It was one of those tastes which to his father had appeared an absolute insanity. He also spent much upon his libraries and his horses, as the Princess Napraxine had said to him. But since he was not a bibliophile, and did not care for rare editions, and never raced or made wagers, his expenditure even here was moderate as compared with his powers. From the time of his early and bitter passion for Sara Vernon he had avoided those famous sorceresses who can beggar Crœsus and discrown Cæsar; they recalled too vividly to him the intense suffering of his boyhood, when he had found himself betrayed by what he adored. To the few women whom he had ever noticed he had been invariably generous even to excess, with a generosity that strove to make amends for the scorn he had for them; but he had had none of those long-enduring *liaisons* which cling like the octopus and drain like the vampire. The knowledge that so many women would have drunk the dregs of infamy at his word for the sake of his gold, held him aloof from them; he was conscious that they pursued him as the sword-fish pursues the fish entangled in a seine. There was no Venusburg which would not have let him enter into its enchantment with his golden key; and this untempted Tannhäuser turned away indifferent. All the rest which attracted other men—gambling, feasting, drinking, racing, living together in feverish crowds—appeared to him ridiculous and tiresome. All the popular vices of men of his rank seemed to him dull and vulgar, trivial and stupid; the life of the *muscadin*, of the masher, seemed to him, on the whole, more stupid than the Tartar's. There was a certain similarity between him and Nadine Napraxine. The world appeared to them both very narrow and its resources few.

For her the result of this impression took the shape of disdain; in him of regret.

In her it was a thirst of the mind, in him it was a hunger of the heart, which led them to think that the land around them was barren.

His friends called him jestingly as Chateaubriand was called, '*le grand ennuyé*,' but it was precisely his vague discontent with the puerilities and the vulgarities of existence which made his affinity to Nadine Napraxine. She had much the same contempt for all those who surrounded her, and who made so much of all their little ambitions, who crowned themselves with straw and thought they reigned, who set their souls on a winning horse, a political measure, a policy, a project, or a *coup d'état*, whilst the

horse was to her taste as much worth wasting thought on as the statesmanship.

If he had heard of his own total ruin he would have put a Horace in his pocket and walked out of the great bronze Renaissance gates of his palace with a serenity which would have had in it nothing either strained or affected. He was no ascetic or philosopher, but his great fortunes bored him, and their origin annoyed him. His temperament would probably have led to higher ambitions if he had not been born to so much possession that ambition had no scope. He was wont to cite as the wisest man the world had known the gay physician of the Fronde epoch, Gui Patin, who sat throughout that troublous time, peaceful and amused, beneath his own cherry-trees. But fate had seated him, himself, beneath the gold pagoda-tree, and the tree seemed to him a sterile one; it had neither fragrance nor shade, yet a million eager hands were always trying to pluck from it, and for him who sat under it there was no quiet. Some one was always wanting him to shake down the fruit into their hands.

He had had one great misfortune: he had known satiety almost before he had known enjoyment; and men were so bent upon making use of him that they did not take time to attach him to them before they disgusted him. The world in general did not like him much; it followed him endlessly, but it thought his reserve arrogance, his simplicity of taste affectation, and his dislike to display avarice. It did not comprehend in the least the simple truth that Othmar would have shaken his gold off him if he could have done so like so much mud. In the Croat character there are both romance and religion; he had more of the Croat than the English temper in him; but, like most men of his time, he had no belief at all, though it was a sorrow to him, not a boast; and the romance of his impulses had been early chilled and silenced by the venal passions offered to his boyhood for sake of his wealth. He learned too early that there is scarcely anything which may not be bought. It is a knowledge which hardens the selfish, but saddens the generous, nature. The irresistible conviction that money is after all the one great power of the world is not an exhilarating or a consoling fact for thoughtful or visionary minds.

He knew very well that he might have been the most vicious brute, the most brutal tyrant, the most merciless of men, and mankind would have served, followed, and flattered him none the less; he could have purchased immunity for most crimes, condonation for most iniquities. So long as he had remained master of his fortune and of his possessions, he knew that men would have sought him none the less eagerly though he had had the vices of a Heliogabalus; and that women would have given themselves to him none the less willingly though he had been as hideous as the Veiled Prophet. It did not make him cynical; but it made him

indifferent, and it moved him at times to a vague sadness. It seemed scarcely worth while for his forefathers to have raised that mountain of gold, only that from its summit he might see the nakedness of the world of men.

CHAPTER VII.

At eight o'clock on the following night Othmar walked across his gardens, under a starlit sky, towards the adjacent grounds of Millo. A few roods of plantation parted his from theirs; in the boundary fence there was a small gate, of which his major-domo had reminded him that a key existed. The night was young, but the stars already were many, and a slender moon had risen in the deep serene blue of the heavens. Though it was midwinter, the air was sweet with the smell of orange orchards in flower, and of the aromatic pine-woods of his own enclosures.

'Will she be there?' he thought a hundred times.

He had kept away from her all the day, had busied himself with his sailors, with his steward, with the condition of the place; but he longed to see that smile which even in its malice was sweeter to him than all the kindness of others, to hear again that voice which was music to his ear, even in its chill, indifferent mockeries.

He had an intuitive belief, which had been shaken but not destroyed by his own failure, that in her nature there were depths to be reached, passions to be awakened, though a bland and cruel indifference at present veiled them. He had been ruthlessly betrayed by her coquetry, profoundly wounded by her coldness, but he believed in her still—even still believed in himself as the man whom ultimately she would love. He had returned to Europe with the resolution never to be in her presence except when the hazards of society should bring them perforce in the same atmosphere, but at the first charm of her regard he had forgotten all his resolves, lost all his wisdom. Life only seemed worth living if he could hear that one voice, so sweet in its modulations, so chilly in its perfect harmony. It was, perhaps, because he was one of the few men who could gratify all wishes, caprices, and ambitions as fast as such arose, that this one thing wholly denied to him, wholly inaccessible, had such force of attraction for him. Yet he was bitterly angered against himself for his own submission. She was but a supreme coquette, a woman *pétrie du monde*, despite all her charm; but she could make her careless little nod, or a half-ironical smile, more prized from her than the utmost tenderness of other women ever was. There was about her that air as of one so wholly indifferent to all the vulgarities which others esteem triumphs that when she ever deigned to notice that a man

existed, he was more flattered than by the fondest concessions of his most ardent adorers. She had been assailed by all the powers and vanities of passion, but she had always given it at most that cool little smile—sometimes the smile had been compassionate, more often it had been cruel. Women had succumbed to him as full-blown roses fall before the touch of a careless hand; for this reason the chillness of Nadine Napraxine, which seemed chastity, had had so strong an attraction for him that for awhile it had seemed to him sweeter to wait upon its caprices than to obtain fuller response from them. But no man tarries long at this stage of his affections, and the time had come when he had grown impatient of a pursuit without end, of an allegiance without recompense. It was like an empty cup of exquisite form and transparent beauty, for ever without wine in it; to the connoisseur the gem is perfect thus, but to those athirst it brings little delight.

The unshuttered windows of Millo were glistening with light, which shone through the thickets of rose-laurel and bay as he approached the house, and a flood of light was poured out shining on the stone *perron*, carpeted and screened closely by rose-coloured awnings from the air of night. After a year and a half spent on tropic seas and in desert lands, the return to society has always a half-sweet, half-bitter, flavour. Was it worth while, he thought, to leave all the routine and tedium and emptiness of the world only to drift back again into its formalities and follies?

He had, however, no choice left in the matter, for the servants in the antechamber were bowing low to him and taking his furred coat from him, and in another moment the Duchesse de Vannes was welcoming him with all the genuine pleasure which a hostess feels in having the first visit from a person long absent, and high enough in the world's favour to make his return to the world an event of social interest and of public importance.

Aurore de Vannes, called Cri-Cri by her friends, was a very pretty woman, as much and as delicately painted as the fan she carried; she wore a marvellous costume of cream-coloured velvet blent with japonica-coloured satin, and had japonicas in her hair and at her bosom; she wore also some very fine rubies.

When he entered the drawing-rooms of Millo there were a dozen persons assembled there, most of whom he knew, but amongst them was not the Princess Napraxine. There was lamentation for her absence, but no surprise at it, because her caprices were so well known.

As he entered a little note had entered behind him; when Madame de Vannes had said all her pretty greetings to him she glanced at it.

'"Désolée—migraine—temps détestable,"' she murmured, as she ran her eyes over it. 'Of course!' she said, aloud, 'that is always Nadine's way—she does it on purpose. She loves to disappoint people. She was out riding this afternoon; I saw her in

the distance with Boris Seliedoff. She treated the Empress in that fashion last winter at Petersburg, and when the Dames du Palais told her that the Tsarina was so displeased that she would exclude her from Court, Nadine said to them quite simply: "Trop de bonté! Je m'habitue si mal à ces corvées-là."'

'And has she been excluded?' asked one of the guests.

'Ouf!' cried the Duchesse de Vannes, 'I see you do not know her. No empress in the world would dare to exclude her. Imagine how she would avenge herself! Courts cannot afford to be brave nowadays.'

Othmar heard every syllable she said as he conversed with de Vannes, a tall man of some eight-and-thirty years old, with a look of extreme distinction and of as supreme fatigue. 'Who is Boris Seliedoff?' he thought, with the restless jealousy of an unsatisfied passion. He regretted his tent in Tartary: the elegant rooms, the perfumed air, the pretty women, the low buzz of conversation, the little breaks of laughter, the artificiality, the monotony of the whole thing, wearied him already.

The dinner was gay and even brilliant; to him alone it seemed tedious. Why had she not come? he thought, and that disappointment alone occupied him. He was angered that she should have so much power to make *la pluie et le beau temps* of his time and of his moods.

'Is Othmar cured by Central Asia?' said one of the guests to the Duchesse de Vannes who looked across the table at him, and answered, 'I should say not. He would hardly be within five leagues of La Jacquemerille if he were so. Besides, Nadine has a power of making herself remembered which I have seen in no one else. It is because she remembers nothing herself. The law of contrasts is the law of affinity.'

'Madame Napraxine is the only woman in whom virtue does not look ridiculous,' said an old gentleman to his neighbour, overhearing her name. 'But then, true, this is because it is not virtue at all, but something much more disdainful and unapproachable. Have you seen a peacock ravage a flower-garden? He does not care for any one of the flowers, but all the same the carnations and roses and geraniums fall in showers as he goes, strewing them right and left, and drawing his plumes carelessly over the waste he has made behind him. Her lovers are no more to Madame Napraxine than the flowers to the peacock; but the result is the same.'

'Is that a quality you would rank very highly?' asked the person next him.

'That depends on your standard,' he answered. 'It is a power which is to her just what plumage is to the peacock—something quite beyond imitation, and royal in its disdainful beauty. I did not think men were ever hopelessly in love in this century, but with her I perceive that they are so.'

'Othmar'—— began the other.

'Othmar?' repeated the old diplomat, 'Othmar reminds me of a man I once knew, who was a collector of miniatures; the collection has been dispersed now by unworthy heirs, but some twenty years ago it was a marvel of completeness. Every admirable miniaturist whom the world has possessed was represented in it by his finest examples. It had taken him thirty-five years and more millions to make it what it was. Anyone else would have thought it perfect. He did not, because he had not an example amongst it of Karl Huth. You may never have heard of Karl Huth; I never had. He was a German miniaturist of the sixteenth century; he dwelt at Daunenberg, a small place on the Elbe. There is nothing of him in any museum, and there was supposed to be nothing of him anywhere but his tradition. For thirty-five years my friend hunted North and South Germany for a Karl Huth. At length, such was his perseverance that he did find an undeniable Karl Huth, in the family of a tradesman at Grieffenhagen, in a little portrait of a woman, on ivory, the size of a walnut, and signed and dated. His joy was immense; but, alas! it was of short duration. The burgomaster who owned it would not part with it. My friend offered sums untold for this three inches of ivory, would have sold his estates to purchase it, stopped at nothing in his frantic offers; but the burgomaster was rich, too, and inflexible; he would not sell the Karl Huth. There was some fable in his family about it. Two obstinacies met with a shock like the foreheads of two elephants in combat; of course the Teuton obstinacy beat the Gaul's. The Karl Huth remained in the burgomaster's possession, and my friend had such an excess of rage and despair that it brought on gout and killed him in an inn in that obscure Pomeranian town—all because with three thousand five hundred famous miniatures he failed to acquire one obscure example. Now Madame Napraxine is certainly not obscure, nevertheless she is the Karl Huth of Othmar. He is one of those men who can command and enjoy everything; therefore, of course, he has set his heart on the only woman, probably, in Europe who will not smile on him. All his grand collection became worthless to my poor friend when once he failed to include in it that single Karl Huth.'

Othmar, meanwhile, unconscious that they talked of him, even unconscious that his passion for his friend's wife had been ever suspected by his world, found the dinner tedious, and was not distracted by his neighbours, both of whom were lovely women.

When they returned to the salons at the further end of the great central drawing-room, which was all white and silver, with satin panels embroidered with silver thread, and doors made of mirrors painted with groups of flowers, there was seated all alone at one of the little tables a very young girl, who wore a plain white gown, with a plain black sash tied around her waist, à

l'enfant, and a black ribbon holding up the thick masses of her fair hair.

'That is Cendrillon,' thought Othmar, moved to a vague interest as he recalled the story which Melville had told; and he looked on her more attentively.

As she rose at the entrance of the Duchesse he saw that she was very tall for her age; the slim, straight, unornamented frock became her: she had neither awkwardness nor self-consciousness, neither much timidity nor any self-assertion. There was a look about her of spirited but restrained life which was pathetic, the look of any high-couraged young animal which is too early and too rudely tamed.

'Poor child!' thought Othmar in an involuntary pity, as he saw the Duchesse go up to her, tap her carelessly on the shoulder with a fan, present her to another lady and with that other lady turn away indifferently after a few words. The girl curtsied low with perfect grace, and resumed her seat; she appeared used to be forgotten. She sat quite still, neither embarrassed by neglect or solicitous of attention. She might have been a statue but for her half-veiled eyes, of a luminous golden brown shaded by long black lashes, and her mouth like a rose, which had made him call her a Greuze picture as she had passed him in the boat. She had looked much happier in the boat than she looked now in the drawing-room.

Othmar watched her a little while. No one approached her: the men present did not care for *ingénues*; the women, it is needless to say, cared still less. The Duchesse did not think it necessary to trouble herself about a child who was still in a convent and would soon be in one for the rest of her days. She was not averse to such an evidence of her own charity as her young cousin presented sitting there, carefully dressed, admirably educated, in living testimony of the benevolence of Aurore de Vannes; but there was no need for more than the tap with the fan and the good-natured indifferent *Comment va-t-on ce soir, petite?*

Othmar waited some ten or twelve minutes, then approached his hostess.

'Duchesse, will you do me the honour to present me to Mdlle. de Valogne?'

She stared at him in astonishment.

'Certainly—yes; why not? But how did you know her name? And she is only a child at Sacré Cœur.'

'Melville told me her sad little story and of all your amiability towards her. Surely she will soon be a very beautiful woman?'

'*Elle n'est pas mal*,' said the Duchesse, somewhat irritably. 'Melville is always romancing, you know; there is nothing to be romantic about; she is destined to the religious life; it was her grandmother's wish, and is her own. As for presenting you to her, she is only a child; it would not be well to make her think herself in the world. If you would excuse me——'

'Pray present me, Duchesse,' he persisted. 'I assure you I do not eat children; and if she be doomed to take the veil so soon, the world will lose her anyhow. But will you have the heart to cut off all that hair?'

'You will always have your own way,' said Madame de Vannes, who knew very well that he did not have it where most he cared; then she took him across to where her young cousin sat, and said, 'Yseulte, Count Othmar wishes to know you; he is a friend of Monsignore Melville's.'

The girl made him the same grand curtsey which she had made before, only a little less low than she had given to the lady. Then she seated herself once more, and waited for him to speak first, as we wait for a royal person to do so.

He spoke to her of Melville, divining that the way to her confidence would be through his regard for the early period of her childhood. She listened with pleasure to his praises of her grandmother's friend, and answered him in few syllables; but the restraint seemed to him the result neither of timidity nor of want of intelligence, but of the reserve which had been imposed upon her alike at her convent and here at Millo, where no one heeded her unless the Duc threw her a good-natured glance, or the Duchesse a petulant word of censure. It was easy to see that on a nature formed for light and laughter, the sense of being unneeded and undesired in the home of others had early cast shadows too deep for childhood.

'How very handsome she is!' he thought, as he spoke of Melville and his many noble works. Close to her he could see the exceeding regularity of her features, the splendour of her eyes, the purity of her complexion, which was not the narcissus whiteness of Nadine Napraxine, but that childlike fairness under which the colour mantles at any passing thought, or any effort or exercise. Her form, too, had all the slenderness and indecision of youth, but it had also the certainty of a magnificent womanhood. Her low dress showed her white shoulders, her quickly-breathing childlike breast, her beautiful throat.

'All to be wasted in a cloister!' he thought, with repugnance. It seemed a sin against nature's finest work, youth's most gracious grace. To be sixteen years old, and to have a face as fair as a flower, and to be the last of a great race, and yet to be doomed to be joyless, loverless, childless, from birth unto death, because a little gold and silver were lacking to her! To the master of millions it seemed the cruelest irony of fate that he had ever encountered. Why should the absurd codes and prejudices of the world make him powerless to give this unhappy child out of his abundance the little which she would need to take her place amidst those common human joys which the poorest can attain, but which the selfishness of man and the customs of society forbade to her, merely because she had been nobly born? He was thinking of

her fate all the while that he talked to her of Melville; he was thinking of that supple slender form disguised under the nun's heavy garb, of that abundant hair shorn and falling to the stone floor. Could those gay, good-natured, idle, spendthrift people who condemned her so lightly to such a sacrifice, not surrender one of their luxuries, one of their follies to save her?

Then he pictured to himself, with a smile at his own whimsical conceit, the tailors' bills of Madame de Vannes curtailed, her caprices sacrificed, her equipages diminished, her *parties de chasse* discontinued, her superfluous jewels sold, to furnish with the result attained a dower to her portionless cousin! These good people called themselves Christians; nevertheless, such generosity would have seemed to them as impossible as to go out on to the boulevards in the goatskin of John the Baptist. Would there ever be a religion that should influence the lives of its professors? Christianity had had its own way for nigh two thousand years, and had scarcely left a mark on the world so far as practical renunciation went.

While he mused thus, he talked lightly and kindly to the girl, but he met with little response. The convent education had taught her silence, and she thought he had only come to her side because he had pitied her solitude; that thought made her shy and proud. With all his good-will, he failed to make much way into her friendship, or to elicit much more than monosyllabic replies, and he would have felt his benevolence wearisome had it not been that there was so much true loveliness in her features and in her form that he was not glad of his release when she was called by the Duchesse to the piano.

'Could you make anything of Yseulte?' said the Duc de Vannes to him. 'She is the true *ingénue* of the novelist and dramatist; she knows nothing beyond the four walls of the convent. It is a type fast disappearing, even with us, under the influence of American women and English romances. I am not sure that it is not to be regretted; it is something, at least, to have a girlhood like a white rose.'

'But you are going to set the rose to wither before the sanctuary of Marie?' said Othmar, still moved by his one idea.

The Duc shrugged his shoulders.

'Oh, that is my wife's affair. Myself, I think it is a pity. The child will be a magnificent woman; but then, you see, she has no dower. Where can she go except to the cloisters? Listen! she sings well.'

She was singing then, and her voice rose with singular richness, like the notes of a nightingale smiting the silence of a golden southern noon. The quality of her voice was pure and strong, with a sound in it as of unshed tears, of restrained, and perhaps unconscious, emotion.

'And she will only sing the *Laus Deo* and the *Kyrie Eleison*,'

thought Othmar, 'and no one will hear her except a few scores of sad-hearted, stupid women, who will succeed in making her as sad-hearted and as stupid as themselves!'

What she rendered was the sweetest of all the simple Noëls written by Roumanille, the song of the blind child who begs her mother to take her to see the Enfant Jésus in the church, and to whom the mother long replies, in chiding and hardness of heart: 'What use, since thou canst not see?' Saint-Saëns had set the naïve and pathetic words to music which was penetrated with that *esprit provençal* which has in it 'les pleurs du peuple et les fleurs du printemps;' and the voice of the girl was pure, tender, and solemn, in unison with what she treated.

'Je sais qu'au tombeau seul finit ma voie obscure;
Je sais encor
Que je ne verrai pas, divine créature,
Ta face d'or.

'Mais qu'est-il besoin d'yeux pour adorer et croire?
Si mes yeux sont
A te voir impuissants, mes mains, ô Dieu de gloire,
Te toucheront!'

L'aveugle à ses genoux pleure si fort, et prie
Sur un tel ton,
D'un air si déchirant, que la mère attendrie
N'a plus dit non.

Oh! comme la pauvrette, en entrant dans la grotte,
En tressaillait!
De Jésus sur son cœur elle mit la menotte:
Elle voyait!

Of all those who listened to her, the old minister, who had spoken of Karl Huth, and Othmar himself, were the only persons touched by the likeness of the words of the Noël to the destiny which awaited the singer of it.

'Je sais qu'au tombeau seul finit ma voie obscure,'

Othmar repeated to himself. 'Poor child! there will be no miracle wrought for her.'

It seemed to him pathetic, and even cruel.

She had sung with science and accuracy which were in contrast with the very youthful cadence of her voice, and when she ceased there was a murmur of applause. She blushed a little, and with a composure that was almost dignity accepted the compliments paid her, and went back, without a word, to her seat.

'She would make a name for herself as an artist if she were not the last Comtesse de Valogne,' thought Othmar. 'Poor child! it is hard to bear all the harness and curb of rank and have none of its gilded oats to eat.'

A pretty *élégante* was now singing a song of Judic's with even more suggestion by gesture and of glance than the original version of it gave; the air of the drawing-room rippled with her silvery

notes and their response of subdued laughter; everyone forgot Mdlle. de Valogne and the Provençal Noël. When Othmar looked again for her, she was gone: the salon saw her no more that night.

'You were soon tired, Othmar,' said the Duchesse. 'Naturally: what should you find to say to a child from a convent? She has not two ideas.'

'She speaks little, certainly,' he answered; 'but I am not sure that it is from want of ideas; and even if she have no ideas, what does a beautiful woman want with them?—and she is beautiful.'

'I thought you liked clever women.'

'Clever! Oh, what a comprehensive word. It is like that balloon they advertise, which you can either fold up in your pocket or float as high as the moon. As for Mdlle. de Valogne, I should think she was very intelligent, to judge by her brow and her eyes. But convents do not nourish their pupils on Renan and Huxley.'

'Renan?' said the Duchesse, with a charming affectation of ignorance. 'Oh, that is the man who writes so many volumes about himself to explain why he cannot bring himself to believe some story about an almond bough that swallowed snakes! When Voltaire began that sort of thing, it seemed shocking, but it was new; nowadays it is not new and nobody is shocked; it is only tiresome.'

'But you, Madame, who laugh, yet respect the Church enough to sacrifice a virgin to it as the Greek to the Minotaur?'

'There is no other retreat possible for girls of good family who are portionless,' said the Duchesse very positively.

'But there are many men who do not marry for a dower.'

'Perhaps, but not with us; it would be quite impossible, an unheard-of thing,' said the Duchesse, scandalised at such a suggestive violation of all etiquette and family dignity.

From time immemorial the younger sons or the unmarriageable daughters of the Valogne, of the Creusac, of the d'Authemont, of all the great races whose blood met in this child, had hidden their narrowed fates with decorum and stateliness in the refuge of the cloisters; why should she, because she had been born in the latter half of the nineteenth century, rebel against so just a disposal? And she did not rebel at all, would not, unless some man made love to her and put rebellion in her head. That man would not be Othmar; he had only one thought—Nadine Napraxine. If she had not been sure of that, she would not even have presented him to her young cousin, for she was a very proud woman despite her frivolity, and to seek a rich alliance for a poor relative would have seemed to her the last of degradations. Her own people and her husband's had always married as sovereigns do, accepting and conferring equal advantages.

'Poverty has the right to be as proud as it chooses so long as it accepts nothing; when once it has accepted anything, it has become mendicity,' had said often the old Marquise de Creusac to her granddaughter, and Yseulte would not do dishonour to that lesson.

'One can trust her implicitly,' said Madame de Vannes once to her husband, who had answered:

'Oh, yes, my dear; that is the result of an old-fashioned education. When your Blanchette and Toinon are at her age, they will know everything objectionable under the sun, but they will not let you know that they know it. You are bringing them up *more britannico*!'

CHAPTER VIII.

YSEULTE DE VALOGNE, waking the next morning and looking through the little panes of her high window in the roof at the landscape which the red leaves of the Canadian vine framed in crimson, was conscious of a new interest in her life. Some one, she did not know whom, for in her confusion she had not heard his name, had spoken to her with kindness, and that deference to her incipient womanhood which is the sweetest flattery to a very young girl. Othmar, with the grace of his manner, the seriousness and coldness which made him different to the men of his time, and his handsome features, to which an habitual reserve had given that expression of self-control and of melancholy which most attracts her sex, had seemed to her imagination like some gracious knight of old bending to pity her loneliness, and to succour that timidity which was in so much due to her pride and her unwillingness to be regarded with compassion and to her dread lest she should seem to seek attention.

She thought of him with a vague personal interest stronger than any she had felt in her simple and monotonous life, since her childhood on the Ile St. Louis had become to her like an old book of prayer, shut up unused, with the lavender and southern-wood of long dead summers faded and dried inside it. Though she was only sixteen, that childhood seemed so far, so very far, away. It would have appeared to Blanchette and Toinon, with their artificial, excited, *blasé* little lives, a dull and austere childhood enough, passed beside the infirmities and incapacities of age, and with no other active pleasure than to gather marguerites on the grass islands of the Seine or to hear a Magnificat sung at Notre Dame.

The rooms they lived in had been narrow and dark, their food had been of the simplest, their days regulated with exact and severe precision. But she had been so happy! When her grand-

mother, with the white hair like spun silk and the thin small hands, on which one great diamond sparkled—sole relic of a splendid past—said, with a smile, 'C'est bien fait, mon enfant,' all the universe could have added nothing to her content.

When the old manservant Bénoît had taken her out to the Sainte Chapelle, or the graves at the Abbaye, and told her tales of how her forefathers had died on the scaffold, in the *noyades*, on the battle-fields of Jemappes, or in the slaughter of Quiberon, she had known that purest of all pride, which rejoices in the honour and loyalty of the dead who have begotten us. All the air about her had been redolent of fidelity, of courage, of dignity. She had breathed in that fine clear atmosphere of integrity as the transparent dianthus drinks in the sea-water which the sunbeams pierce with vivifying gold. When the Marquise had sometimes taken, out of old sandal-wood coffers, antique brocades, dusky old jewels, faded yellow letters, perhaps a ribbon and a star of some extinct order once worn at Marly or Amboise, the child had listened with reverent ear and beating heart to the stories which went with the relics and keepsakes, and it had always seemed to her as if some perfume of the past entered her veins, as its fragrance is poured upwards from the root into the flower. Nor had it been always melancholy, that innocent, tranquil life; gentlemen of the old courtly habits had made their bow humbly in those narrow rooms, and the old *gaieté gauloise* had laughed sometimes beneath the sad serenity of losses nobly borne. There had been merry days when Bénoît had taken her in one of the boats which cross the Seine in summer, and had rowed to one of those quiet nooks of which he had the secret, and had landed with her amidst the tall hay grasses, and had set her noonday meal there—a little fruit and roll of bread—watching the poplars quiver in the light, and the women work upon the shore, and the clumsy brown brigs come and go on the brown breast of the river; and she had clasped a great sheaf of may and daisies and kingcups in her arms, and had run hither and thither in a very ecstasy of limbs set free and eyes delighted, and had cried her delight aloud to the old man, who had nodded and smiled and said, 'Oui, oui, c'est beau,' but had thought, with a pang at his faithful heart, 'Si jeunesse savait——'

Then, whilst she was still a young child, there had fallen across her life the darkness of the 'année terrible.' The Marquise de Creusac had been at once too brave and too poor to quit Paris when the wall of iron and of fire had closed in around it. Her sons had died, one at the cavalry charge of Frœschweiler, the other during the siege of Strasburg; she herself never rose from her bed during that ghastly winter, and her last breath left her lips as the Prussians entered Paris. The horror of that time could never wholly pass from the mind of Yseulte. Bénoît had travelled with her to the château of Bois les Rois, and placed her

under the roof of her only living relative, Aurore de Vannes, who herself was momentarily saddened and touched by the misfortunes of the country and the loss of many of her kinsmen, and in that chastened mood was kinder to the little friendless fugitive than she might have been at another and less desperate time.

All that time seemed very far away to Yseulte now; to earliest youth a few years seem like the gap of a century.

Bénoît was dead now, like the mistress he had adored and served, with that loyal service which, in this latter time, one class has lost the power to inspire and the other class has lost the capacity to render; but those happy midsummer holidays on the islets of the Seine were always in her mind whenever she felt the touch of the fresh air or smelt the scent of growing leaves. They had spread a fragrance like that of summer all over her memories of childhood. She pitied Blanchette and Toinon, who cared nothing for daisies and kingcups; who tired so soon of their costly playthings; who knew their Trouville and Biarritz by heart; who, when they played at their games, were either peevish or bored; and who looked with all the scorn of fashionable eight-year-olders on a toilette which was a season out of date. Blanchette and Toinon would die without ever having been young; their cousin, who at sixteen was still entirely a child, had to die to the world before she had begun to live.

She leaned out of her window in the chill of the early morning, and she watched the sea mists curl up and drift away before the sun, the mountains come forth slowly from the clouds obscuring them, the light touch and reveal one by one the low white bastides, the grey olive yards, the bosquets of orange and lemon, the fields where the young corn already was spreading, the fantastic buildings which diversified and vulgarised the beauty of the scene, and the grey towers of S. Pharamond sober and severe amidst its ilex woods by contrast with the coquetteries and motley phantasies of its neighbours.

'I wonder,' she thought for the hundredth time, 'if it were only because he pitied me that he talked to me?'

She went on wondering who he was, what he was; she did not even know that he owned S. Pharamond, and dared ask no one about him; all the gay, thoughtless, inquisitive questions which youth loves to put, whilst often too impatient to wait for an answer to them, had been too perpetually frozen on her lips for silence not to have become a second nature to her.

'What you can observe is well,' her grandmother had often said to her; 'it is the wheat you have gleaned, and you have a right to it. But never gain knowledge by asking questions; it is the short cut across the fields which only trespassers take.'

At the convent any interrogations which she had been tempted to make had been repressed as too apposite to be convenient, and of the Duchesse de Vannes she would have no more have asked a

question or a favour than she would have asked one of the lay figures on which the Duchesse's marvellous costumes were built up, bit by bit, as idea succeeded to idea in the brains of great artists of the toilette.

She had scarcely heard a dozen sentences from Madame Aurore in the half-dozen years through which she had spent her summer vacations at their great castle in the Vosges, a lonely place where she had usually only the house-servants as companions; but in winter at Millo she had been always happy, for near Millo dwelt her foster-mother, a Savoyarde, who had become well-to-do since the time when, a poor young unwedded mother astray on the mercy of Paris, she had been glad to give her breast to the motherless child of the Comtesse de Valogne. Through the influence and aid of the Marquise de Creusac the woman Nicole had ultimately married her lover, a sturdy peasant of the environs of Nice, and by thrift and hard work and gook luck and good husbandry combined, they now owned a bastide and an orange-orchard, and could receive 'la petite Comtesse' with honey and cream and conserves of their own manufacture. They had no children, and Mdlle. de Valogne still filled in the heart of her foster-mother the place which had been empty and cold when a month-old baby had gasped out its last breath of feeble life in a Paris hospital sixteen years before.

'What is the good of it all, the *pétiot* is dead and gone?' said Nicole Sandroz many a time, looking over her hives and hen-houses, her rose-beds and her green peas, all blooming for the Paris market. But this mood was transient; the *pétiot* was not to be recalled by regret, and the solid delight of early vegetables and their value remained to her. She was a good woman, though hard in some ways and greedy; but she was the only creature who gave Yseulte de Valogne anything of the comfort of human affection, and tender, blind, unreasoning admiration. To Nicole 'mon enfant la Comtesse' was an object of honest adoration, to be waited on, worshipped, petted, slaved for if need be; and this wholly sincere, if clumsy, devotion had always been to the starved heart of the girl as the one scrap of moss on the frozen sea and shore is to the lonely and lost voyager.

When the dark, hard-featured face of the Niçoise presented itself at the convent gates of Faïel, and with her load of oranges or strawberries, of camellias or roses, she came out of the hot sun into the quietness and dusk of the *parloir* and stretched out her big sturdy arms to her nursling, the proud eyes of Yseulte filled with tears as no one else ever saw them do. She was a little child once more clinging to her nurse's skirts in the old panelled rooms in the Ile St. Louis.

The low white walls of the bastide were set upon a hill-side not half-an-hour's walk from Millo, a fragrant, pleasant, homely place, with violets cultured like corn, and roses grown like cur-

rant-bushes for the flower-shops of Paris and the purchase of the foreigners in Nice. The mere presence of Nicole made her visits to the southern shore longed for and enjoyed, and compensated to her for the fretful teasing of her little cousins, the ill-concealed enmity of their governesses, the perpetual sense of being undesired by anyone there, and the many slights which the indifference of her hosts made them careless of inflicting. Aurore de Vannes would have said, if remonstrated with, that the girl could want for nothing. She had two pretty rooms all to herself, and a piano in one of them; had as many gowns as she could wear, though, of course, at her age they were the frocks of a *pensionnaire*; and could pass her time in the schoolroom or in the gardens very much at her pleasure; she could even drive out in the basket-carriage if Blanchette and Toinon did not want it. The existence must, she would have argued, at any rate be very much livelier than the convent.

In the first winter she had passed at Millo no one had come there but herself, and she had spent her time almost wholly with her foster-mother; later on, when the house was full—as it was now—she obtained in her holidays a large amount of liberty, from the fact that it was no one's especial duty to look after her. She used her freedom innocently enough, and always took the path under the olives which led to the flower-farm of the Sandroz.

Once the Duchesse had said to her irritably, 'What charm do you find in peasants grubbing among peastalks and growing salad?' But she had not waited for an answer, which was fortunate, as Yseulte would have been too shy to give the true one—that they loved her a little.

The Duchesse concluded that the governesses of her children did their duty in attending on her young cousin. The governesses, however, were willing that one who was only an extra charge to them should do as she chose so long as she brought no trouble on themselves. Few mornings passed without her finding her way to the welcome of her old nurse, to sit at pleasure under the shadow of the orange leaves, or drift through clear water in the big market boat.

Madame de Vannes was, as the world in general would have said, very generous to her; her education was of the best, the clothes provided for her were elegant and suitable, her linen was of the finest, her boots and shoes were the prettiest possible; the Duchesse did everything well that she did at all; but beyond a remark that her hair was too low or too high on her forehead, or that she did not wear the right gloves with the right frock, Yseulte could scarcely recall twenty phrases that she had heard from her august cousin. Now and then the heart of the girl had risen in an impulse of ardour towards liberty, towards independence. She was conscious of more talent than the manner of her education had developed; in a vague way she sometimes

fancied the world might hold some place for her, some freedom of effort or attainment; but all the habits of obedience made a cage for her as surely as the laws made one. Her grandmother had written with a hand half paralysed by death to commend her to the care of her relative, and amongst her dying words the command: 'Obey Aurore as you have obeyed me,' had been often repeated. Any thought of rebellion was stifled by her sense of duty as soon as it arose.

This morning, as she leaned out of her window she could see the white house of the Sandroz, half a league away, amongst the olive foliage, and what was still more to her, the tiny bell tower of a little whitewashed church, the parish church of S. Pharamond, in whose parish Millo also lay. The one cracked bell sounding feebly for matins recalled her to the present hour, and reminded her that the morrow was the feast day of S. Cecilia, to whom the building was dedicated.

'He will be so vexed if the altar be not dressed,' she thought. The old priest of Millo was accustomed to look to her for that service. The Duchesse always gave him two thousand francs in gold for his poor at New Year, but there her heed of her vicar ended. Yseulte, who had no gold to give, brought him flowers and boughs for his little, dusky, lonely place, where only a few fishermen and peasants ever knelt, and she sometimes sang at his Offices.

When she remembered the day, she wasted no more time at the window; she drank the cup of milk and ate the roll which the maid appointed to her service brought, and putting on a little hat of fur, went out through the house where even Blanchette and Toinon were still asleep, and only a few of the under servants were stirring.

It was cold, but already grown bright, with sunshine, and the promise of a warm noonday.

The gardens of Millo, with their autumn luxuriance still prolonged, were sparkling with sunbeams and dew-drops; their aloes and cacti pierced with broad sword-blades the blue clear air; the latest roses kissed the earliest camellias; the pink, the amber, the white, the purple, of groves of chrysanthemums, glowed in the parterres; but she did not dare to give them even a glance. No one ever plucked a flower there.

She went quickly through the alleys, and avenues, over the lawns, and under the *berceaux*, and after walking about a mile came to where the boundary of Millo was fixed by a high wall of closely-clipped arbutus, and only the small iron gate which Othma had unlocked the previous night gave access to the lands of S. Pharamond, which lay beyond.

'There will be sure to be something here,' she thought, as she turned the latch of the gate which he had unthinkingly left open, and passed through the aperture into the thick ilex wood on the other side of the bearberry wall. She was not surprised to find it

open, for the gardeners of the two houses often held communication; and she had been constantly permitted by those of S. Pharamond to wander about its grounds and pluck its commoner plants. It was a thing she had done a hundred times in the winters she had passed at Millo.

There were all kinds of plants growing up at Nicole's bastide; but as she had no money to pay, the child had always felt a delicacy in asking for them. Her foster-mother would indeed have refused her nothing; but to take as a gift the late-come *quatre-saisons* rose, or the early-blooming *clochettes*, which the Sandroz could sell so highly by sending them away in little air-tight tin boxes to Paris, would have appeared to the generous temper of the last of the Valognes a very ungenerous act.

Othmar, who had slept ill, rose early that day. When he had bathed and dressed, he strolled out on to his terrace, where Nadine Napraxine had eaten her strawberries. Though winter, the morning was mild, the sunrise glorious. Through the great gloom of his ilex groves he could see the sparkle of blue waves. It was not the scenery he cared most for; he liked the great windy shadowy plains of eastern Europe, the snow of mountains more sombre and severe than these hyacinth-hued maritime Alps, the gigantic grey walls of Atlantic rollers breaking on rugged rocks of Spain, or Brittany, or Scotland; but he was not insensible to the present beauty which surrounded him, if it were brighter and paler of hue, gayer of tone, softer in character, than the scenes he preferred.

He stood and looked idly, and thinking, 'If I were wise I should go to Paris this morning.'

What was the use of letting all his years languish and drift aimlessly away for sake of a woman who made sport of his pain? Yonder, hidden by the curve of a distant cliff, was La Jacquemerille, and its mistress of the moment was, no doubt, sleeping soundly enough amongst the lace and cambric and satin of her bed, and would not have lain awake one moment thinking of him, though he had thought of her all night.

'Were people ever sleepless for love?' she had said once with her pretty cynical smile. 'That must have been very long ago, before the chemists had given us chloral!'

As he stood and thus made his picture of her in his mind sleeping, as the narcissus which she resembled sleeps in the moonlight, he saw a figure underneath the ilex boughs which was not hers, but had a grace of its own, though wholly unlike her.

It was the figure of a girl in a grey close dress which defined the outline of her tall slim limbs. She wore a fur hat, and had some fur about her shoulders; the sunbeams of the early day touched the gold in her hair and shone in her hazel eyes. She was gathering now one datura, now another, of those spared by the December mistral, and coming up to a bed of camellias, paused doubtfully before their blossoms; she came there like one accustomed

to the place, and who merely did what she had often done before. Her grey gown, her sunny hair under its crown of sable, her hands filled with flowers, made a picture underneath the palms, amidst the statues, against the ilex darkness.

He recognised the child whom he had last seen in her white gown with the black sash a few hours before in the Duchesse's drawing-rooms.

For the moment, he put on her appearance there that construction which a man, subject from his boyhood to the advances and solicitations of the other sex, was most apt to conceive of such an unsought visit. But as he saw how unconcerned, natural, and childlike her movements were as she paused, now by this shrub, and now by that, or sat down on a bench to arrange some asters in her basket, he as rapidly discarded his suspicions and guessed the truth, that she had been ignorant of who he was the previous evening, and had come to his gardens by chance or by custom.

As he hesitated whether to descend and make her welcome, or to retreat unseen into the house and tell his servants to say nothing, she looked up and saw him. She dropped her flowers on the grass, and turned to run away like any startled nymph in classic verse, but he was too quick for her; he had descended the few steps from his terrace and had approached her before she could fly from him.

'Do not be so unkind to me,' he said, with deference and courtesy, for he divined how ashamed she was to have been found there. 'There is little in these gardens after being swept by the mistral, which is a cruel horticulturist, but the hothouses, I hope, may give you something worthier your acceptance.'

'I beg your pardon,' she murmured, 'there has been no one here so long——'

He had spoken as though her presence was the most natural thing in the world, but neither his composed acceptance of it or his courteous welcome could reconcile her to the position she occupied. She coloured painfully, and her breath came and went in an agitation she could not subdue.

'I beg your pardon,' she stammered again; 'I did not know—last night I did not hear your name—there has been no one here so long. Oh, what can you think of me!'

Her eyes were filled with sudden tears; her colour faded as suddenly as it had come. She was only a child, and had been reared by stern formalities and by chill precepts.

'Think?' echoed Othmar; 'that you are kind enough to treat me as a neighbour. Neighbours are not always friends, but I hope we shall be so. That little gate has no use in it unless it be an open portal for friendship to pass to and fro; I walked through it to Millo last night.'

But his good nature and gentleness could not avail to console her for what was in her own eyes, as it would have been in those of her relatives, an unpardonable and infamous misdemeanour. Now

that she recognised in the speaker the same person whom her cousin had presented to her the previous evening, she longed for the lawn she stood on to open and cover her. A piteous dismay took possession of her; would he ever believe that she had not known him as the owner of S. Pharamond? Would he ever believe that S. Pharamond had been that morning, as far as her knowledge had gone, still unoccupied as it had been for ten mortal years?

All the lessons of her convent life made her act appear in her own eyes one of inexcusable audacity, unspeakable horror—to have come into the gardens of a stranger when he was himself there to take his flowers!

The kindness of his gaze and the cordiality of his welcome could do nothing to console her; she was barely conscious of them; the colour in her face mounted to the loose curls escaping from her little fur cap; she laid her basket down and joined her hands in an unconscious supplication.

'There has been no one here so long,' she said yet again with pathetic appeal in her voice. 'I thought I did no harm; M. Duvelleroy, the head-gardener, has always let me come when there is a feast day. Indeed, I have never taken the rare flowers, only those which he did not want. It is the parish church of S. Pharamond, too; I did not know I did wrong—pray do not blame the gardeners.'

'Blame them, when I am so much their debtor! I wish you would believe that you are the queen of all the gardens here. Why, even still you are hesitating to pluck the camellias!'

'Because they told me never to touch them; I only looked at them; I think M. Duvelleroy sends them to Nice to sell. Indeed —indeed—I have never taken but what he told me I might have.'

What seemed so very terrible to her was that she must appear to the owner of S. Pharamond as a thief of his flowers! A vague idea flashed across her mind, that perhaps she might pay for the value of them—but then she had no money! The old jewels of her mother were to be hers, indeed; but when? She had not even seen them since her grandmother had died; perhaps they were to be sold to defray the cost of her entrance into convent life; she did not know. The great trouble of her spirit was reflected in her face, which was full of conflicting emotions; her mouth, which had been too silent the night before, trembled a little; the tears gleamed under her long lashes. Othmar thought her much more interesting with all this expression breaking up from under the mask of white marble which the convent had made her wear. In her bewilderment she became altogether a child; and the stately quiet of her manner fell away from her like an embroidered ermine-lined robe too heavy for her years.

'Do they sell my camellias—the rogues?' he said with a smile. 'Of course you shall go away if you will, but not empty-handed. There must be something better worth having than those frost-bitten roses'

He called a man who was sweeping up leaves on a lawn here.

'Go and tell your chief to cut his finest orchids and bring them in a basket to me himself: any other rare thing he may have in the houses he can cut also. Mademoiselle,' he said, turning to the girl, 'you must not go back to Millo with such a poor opinion of my gardens. Is the Duchesse well? You remember that I had the honour to be presented to you by her last evening?'

'You are Count Othmar?'

'Men call me so,' he replied, for he never loved that title which seemed to him so contemptible a thing, given, as it had been, in the beginning of the century by the first Emperor. 'I am happy to be the owner of S. Pharamond, since you deign to visit it. You are at Millo every winter, I think?'

'I am; they are not,' she said, regaining her composure a little. 'I did not hear your name last night. I thought you were some gentleman from Paris.'

'I live oftenest in Paris,' he replied, 'but at the present moment I come from Central Asia. I am a friend of Monsignore Melville, as I told you; and I hope you will believe me when I say that, if only for his regard for you, you would be welcome at S. Pharamond.'

He spoke without compliment, seeing that any compliment would only scare her more.

'You help my parish church, did you say?' he continued. 'It is very disgraceful of me never to have known it; we will get Melville to come and preach there. Does the curé want for anything?—is there nothing I could do?'

'He wants a new *soutane* very much,' she said with hesitation.

'Then a new *soutane* he shall have before the world is a week older,' said Othmar. 'Why will you go away? Are you too afraid of me to venture into the house? Would you not have some cream, some cakes, some strawberries? What do young Graces like you live upon? Command anything you will.'

'I have had some bread and milk; I want nothing; you are very kind.'

'If you think me so, you must not treat me so distantly. You must make me a friend of yours. The Duchesse herself presented me last night. You seem determined to forget that.'

She stood inclined to go away, unwilling to seem ungrateful, yet afraid to remain; a charming picture of confusion and indecision, mingled with a gravity and a grace beyond her years. The Greuze face which he had seen in the boat bore the full force of the morning light as a rose bears it, the pure tints only deepened and illumined by it. Under the straight simple lines of the grey stuff gown the budding beauties of a still childish form could be divined; in her embarrassment her colour still came and went; her large eyes, of a golden hazel, were almost

black from the shadow of their lashes. So far as a man whose heart and senses are engrossed by one woman can be alive to the loveliness of another, Othmar was sensible of this youthful and poetic beauty, which seemed to belong to the first fresh hours of the morning, and to be born of it as the rosebuds were.

'I hope you will not be angry,' she said anxiously. 'It was my fault. At Millo no one must touch a single flower, and the curé likes to see the altar pretty, and so one day—oh, that is quite a long time ago, three winters ago—I happened to see the gate open into these grounds, and I asked M. Henri if I might gather what he did not care to sell, and he said that I was welcome always to the common flowers. You will not blame him, if you please, for it was altogether my fault.'

She had seldom made a speech so long in her life, and she paused, ashamed of the sound of her voice in the quiet of the morning air. She feared also that she was doing wrong to speak at all to this stranger, all owner of S. Pharamond though he might be.

'All that I am inclined to blame him for,' answered Othmar, 'is for having laid any restrictions upon you; he has no right to sell even a sprig of mignonette. These gardens are not kept for profit; they can have no happier use than to contribute to your pleasure and to the altars of the church. Pray, do not go; wait a moment for this criminal to bring us the orchids.'

But she only grew more alarmed at her own intrusion there. The easy, kindly gallantry of his manner scarcely reassured her; she was but a child, and a child reared in formal and severe codes. She doubted that she was guilty of some grave offence in standing under a palm-tree beside a group of camellias with a person whom she had scarcely seen before. She had neither the habits of the world nor the conventional badinage which could have met his courtesy on its own ground and replied to it in a few careless phrases. But it seemed to him that her silence was golden, as golden as the gleams in her changeful hazel eyes as the sun smote on them.

'If you would allow me to go,' she murmured, 'I have quite enough flowers here. It is such a small church, and the orchids would be much too rare——'

'If the orchids were made of rubies and pearls, what happier fate could they ask than to fall from your hands on to the altars of the Madonna?' said Othmar, as he broke off the blossoms of his camellias with no sparing hand.

At that moment the head-gardener, alarmed and disturbed at the message which he had received from his master, came in sight with a basket hurriedly filled with some of the choicest treasures of his forcing-houses. Othmar took it from him:

'You did quite right,' he said in a low tone, 'to make my friends welcome to the gardens in my absence, but another time,

M. Duvelleroy, make them welcome to the best; do not reserve it for the markets and the florist shops of Nice.'

The man, guilty, and taken at a disadvantage, had no time to prepare a lie; he grew red, and stammered, and was thankful for his master's gesture of dismissal as Othmar turned from him impatiently and offered the orchids to the girl.

'You are angry with him,' she said, anxiety conquering her timidity.

'Not so; I am grateful to him,' said Othmar. 'But I shall, perhaps, be angry with my house-steward, whose duty it is to keep these rogues clean-handed. If he had given you his best flowers I would have pensioned him for life, but to limit you to taking what he did not want to sell, was to disgrace S. Pharamond.'

'Indeed, he has been very kind all these three winters,' she murmured, in infinite distress at the thought that she had inadvertently injured the man in his master's opinion.

'He shall wear the order of St. Fiacre if you like, if there be such an order to reward good gardeners,' said Othmar gaily, seeing her genuine anxiety on the man's behalf. 'I may come and see your decorations to-morrow. Shall I send you a load of flowers? That would be better I think.'

She looked alarmed.

'Oh no; oh pray, do not!' she said with earnestness. 'You are very kind to think of it, Monsieur, but it would frighten the curé, and we should not know what to do with so many, the church is so very small——'

She hesitated a moment, the colour in her cheeks grew warm as she added:

'My cousin does not know that I come here. I do not mean that it is any secret, but she might think it wrong, intrusive, impertinent——'

'She could think nothing of the sort,' said Othmar. 'They are three words which no one could associate with Mdlle. de Valogne; I am delighted my deserted house could be so honoured. Must you go? I shall not easily forgive myself if I frighten you away. Let me come with you to the gate at least.'

He walked beside her under the palms and on the shaven grass down an aisle of clipped arbutus, carrying for her the camellias, white and rose, which he had broken off their plants with no care for the appearance of the group to which they belonged.

She was silent; she was subdued by an unwonted sense of wrong-doing; she fancied that she had committed some terrible indiscretion; but how was she to have known that he was there, when for three winters the camellias had blossomed unseen in those silent evergreen ways which no step but a gardener's had ever disturbed, and where she had come to watch the blackbirds trip over the fallen leaves, and the fountains dance in the sunshine, and the tea-roses shower petals of cream and of gold on the

terraces, with no more thought or hesitation than she had gone to the olive-yards of Nicole Sandroz? Her confusion had nothing of awkwardness. It was very graceful, almost stately, in its silence; it was the grave innocence, the startled hesitation, of the young nymph surprised in the sanctuary of the grove.

She accepted the orchids with a serious gratitude, which seemed to him quite out of proportion to the slenderness of the gift; but when he said as much she interrupted him:

'They are so beautiful,' she said earnestly. 'It seems cruel to have plucked them. One fancies they will take wing like the butterflies.'

'You are very fond of flowers?'

'Oh yes—and people waste them so. At my cousin's ball last week there were five thousand roses. I saw them in the morning; they were quite dead.'

'Did you not see them at night?'

'At night, no; how could I? I am not in the world; I never shall be. Sometimes they tell me to be an hour in the reception-rooms after dinner; that is all: I do not care for it.'

'But do you not wish for the time of balls to come? Every young girl does.'

'I try never to think about it,' she said simply. 'I know it will never come for me.'

There was a resignation in her words which was more pathetic than any regrets.

Then with the colour hot in her cheeks again, remembering that she was speaking too much to a stranger, she opened the little gate in the arbutus walk which led into the grounds of Millo. 'I thank you very much,' she murmured. 'I assure you I will never come again.'

'And unless you come again, I assure you that you will tell me tacitly that I have had the misfortune to displease you,' said Othmar, as he held open the gate, and bowed low to her; he saw that it would be only unkindness to detain her or to accompany her. She was as uneasy as a bird which has flown by mistake into a conservatory.

'I will come to the church to-morrow,' he added. 'Do you not sing there sometimes?'

'Now and then. There is no one else to sing. But my cousin does not approve of it. She thinks there may be people over from Nice; but there never are. There is no one but the peasants.'

'The Duchesse will not mind me,' said Othmar. 'Let us say *au revoir*!'

He kissed her hand with a careless gallantry which made her colour over her brow and throat, and let her leave him. She sped like a frightened fawn over the turf and was soon lost to sight in the bosquets of Millo.

Othmar strolled back to the house.

'Au tombeau seul finit ma voie obscure.'

he repeated to himself as he looked after her; the pathos of her

destiny gave her a spirituality and a sanctity in his sight, and the song of the blind child and its young singer for a few moments disputed a place in his memory with the vision of Nadine Napraxine as she had plucked the tea-roses on his terrace to let them fall.

'That young girl would not let a rose fade,' he thought, 'and her own roses are to wither between convent walls! What arbitrary caprices has Fate! If they would only let me give her a million——'

But they would not even have let him give her orchids and camellias had they known it.

CHAPTER IX.

OTHMAR went into his house, but before taking his coffee sent for his steward, and gave him a brief but severe reprimand for having permitted Duvelleroy and his underlings to use the gardens as a nursery-ground.

'The grounds may be sacked to please my friends,' he said, in conclusion. 'But if a single carnation be sold for a single centime, it is not the seller who will be dismissed, but yourself, who are paid highly only that you may save your subordinates from those temptations which kill honesty and should be no more left in the path of poor men than poisoned mangolds in a sheep-field.

The notion that his hothouses and gardens had furnished the flower-sellers of Nice with materials for their myriads of bouquets, irritated him disproportionately. He would have taken his oath that on none of his estates did his people steal a farthing's worth. They were all highly paid, and those set in authority over them were all men who had been chosen and enriched by his father; he had often spoken of their probity and affection with pride; and now they cheated him for sake of selling a bouquet!

It was a mere trifle, no doubt. He would have cleared his gardens at a stroke to please anyone he liked; and he would have given a poor man willingly the value of all his forcing-houses: but the knowledge that his hirelings sold his mignonette and his heliotrope to profit themselves irritated him, and even quite embittered life to him for the moment. The most generous minds feel the most acutely betrayal in small things, and resent most vividly the contemptible robberies which take advantage of trust and opportunity. That the rich man is so seldom honestly served goes further, perhaps, to redress the balance between him and the poor man than the latter, in his ignorance, ever supposes.

'After all,' he thought, 'perhaps I only feed rogues, like Napraxine.' And the thought was painful to him, for he fed them well.

It was primarily his own fault for so seldom coming to the place; perhaps it was natural that when years rolled on and they

never saw their master they should learn to consider his possessions as almost their own. But he had so many places that he could not live in them all. His fathers had bought them, so, out of respect to their memories, he could not get rid of them. He had a great house on the Boulevard St.-Germain; another great house in Piccadilly: another in the Teresian Platz of Vienna; he had estates in France, England, Germany, and Austria, a Scotch moor, a Flemish forest, a château on the shores of the Dalmatian Adriatic, a villa at Biarritz, a castle in dense woods on the Moselle, and whole towns, villages, plains, and hills in Croatia itself. How was he to live at all these places? He lent them liberally, but he could hardly sell them; the head of the house of Othmar could not sell what he had inherited. If he had sold them he would only have had more millions with which he would not have known what to do.

When he had drunk a cup of coffee and a glass of iced water, he went for a long ride, mounting high up into the hills until the sea lay far below, blue as a great bed of mysotis, and the gilded cupolas of La Jacquemerille glittered in his sight far beneath the darkening slopes of pine. When he returned to his one o'clock breakfast, he found that his house was deserted no more. He was told that his uncle, the Baron Friederich, had arrived by the *rapide* from Paris. He was not greatly pleased, but he prepared to do his duties as a host without betraying his sense that the new comer was not precisely in harmony with a romantic retreat amidst myrtles, camellias, and bromelias.

But he also foresaw a tedious day and evening, and he did not care to have the keen blue eyes of his father's brother fixed on him at a moment when he was sending telegrams in all directions and commanding all kinds of novel diversions to amuse and receive the Princess Napraxine.

'Have your travels tended to convince you that Europeans are wrong not to let the tails of sheep fatten and appear at their tables?' said his unbidden guest, coming out of the house as though they had parted the previous night instead of twenty months before.

There was no figure better known in Paris than that of the Baron Friederich Othmar, familiar to society all over Europe as Baron Fritz; a tall and portly figure carried with the ease and vigour of manhood, though age had whitened the hair, that was still abundant, on the handsome head above. He never attempted to conceal his age: he despised all *maquillage*, as all healthy and all clever men do; and if his skin was as fair and his hands were as white and soft as a duchess's, it was because nature had made them so, and a life temperate in indulgence though entirely unscrupulous in morals had preserved his health and his strength unimpaired save by occasional twinges of the gout. With old Gaulois blood in him, Friederich Othmar was a thorough Parisian in habit, taste, and manner; but he was a true Slav in suppleness,

sagacity, and profound secretiveness. Othmar thought that there was not on the face of the earth another man with such a hideous power of dissimulation as his uncle; whilst the elder man, on the contrary, looked upon such dissimulation as the mere mark which distinguishes the civilised being from the savage. 'Dissimulation lies at the root of all good manners,' he was wont to say in moments of frankness. 'Your friend bores you infinitely; you smile, and appear charmed! If you do not, you are a boor. Dissimulation is the essence of Christianity; you are enjoined to turn one cheek after another, and not to show that you smart. Dissimulation is the only thing that makes society possible; without its amenities, the world would be a bear-garden.'

On the Bourse 'Baron Fritz' was dreaded as the keenest-witted colossus of finance in all Europe. His acumen was unerring; his mind was as sensitive to the changes of the political atmosphere as an electric wire to heat. He perceived long before anyone else the little cloud, not so big as a man's hand, which was pregnant with storm whilst yet the sky was clear; he heard long before anyone else the low tremor in the bowels of the earth which prefaced the seismic convulsion, as yet undreamed of by a sleeping world. Therefore, with supreme tact and matchless instinct, he had made the House of Othmar the envy of all its peers. 'What are statesman without us?' said Friederich Othmar. 'They cannot move, they cannot strike, unless the financiers enable them to do so; all their combinations crumble like a dropt bird's-nest unless we are willing to sustain them. If Germany had had no money, could she have crossed the Rhine? The finest army in the world is no more than a child's set of metal soldiers if it be not *roulant sur l'or*. The statesmen are thought to be the chief rulers and prime motors of the fate of the world, but they can but act as we who are behind them permit: they drag the coach; we drive it.'

'That I know,' answered Othmar. 'We have the most gigantic responsibility united with the most utterly corrupt moral code. I grant that we are, in a way, the Cæsars of the modern world, but we are bestially selfish; we are hog-like in our repletion, as all Cæsars become. No financier ever risked ruin for a noble impulse or for a lost cause. If he did, he would seem mad to his guild, as Ulysses to his companions.'

All the enjoyment and sense of power which Othmar contemptuously rejected his uncle appreciated to the full: he was, in his own way, a Wolsey, a Richelieu, a Bismarck. Nothing of much importance had been done in Europe for the last forty years without Friederich Othmar being beneath it, in more or less degree, for weal or woe. He had those unerring instincts which amount in their own way to genius.

Endowed with one of those keen, logical, yet imaginative brains, which are as necessary to the great financier as to the great statesman, he had worked unweariedly all his life long for

the sake and for the glory of the house of Othmar; he was in no way of his nephew's opinion; he considered that the world held nothing finer than the fortunes which had been built up out of Marc Othmar's kreutzers till it was solid as so many towers of bullion; he considered the position of the capitalist who can refuse a king, sustain a nation, fructify great enterprises, and constrain or restrain great wars, was not to be exchanged with any other power under the sun. In finance he was inexorable, unerring; full of the finest penetration, and the most piercing acumen; stern as granite, piercing as steel. In private life he was an amiable cynic, who cared for very little except the reputation of his dinners and his collection of water-colours. Baron Fritz was never really content out of his little hotel, which was as cosy as a satin-lined bag, and where by stretching out a finger to touch an ivory button he could put himself in communication with all the centres of finance in Europe. Without moving from his velvet chair or taking his foot from its gout-stool he could converse with his brother capitalists at all quarters of the globe, and change the fate of nations and the surface of events in the course of a winter's forenoon during a pause between two cigarettes. To be able to do so seemed to him the very flower and perfection of life. It was to play chess with the world for your board, and to say checkmate to living and crowned kings.

Whenever he expatiated on that theme to his nephew, Othmar only replied that he himself did not care for any games.

For the rest, his one great social amusement was whist; he could never see why men forsook their clubs because hay was being mown and corn reaped and grapes gathered. You bought forage, you ate bread—very little of it—and you drank wine, but why because those three things were all in their embryo state every city in Europe should become empty, he had not patience to comprehend. No place was cooler, shadier, quieter, than your club. The vast green silent country which his nephew loved was to him an outer darkness; he detested *le province* with all the maliciousness against it of a born and bred Parisian.

To see a breezy common on a six-inch square of David Cox, or a brook purling amongst rushes by Bonnington, was to have as much of the country as he cared to enjoy. The stones of Vienna, the asphalte of Paris, were the only ground he cared to tread. He had educated his cook into perfect excellence, and never travelled anywhere without him and his battery of silver saucepans. 'Because you sleep in a strange bed there is no reason why you should let yourself be poisoned by strange dishes,' he invariably said.

On the whole he had led a happy and enviable life; he was a perfectly selfish man, with one great unselfish loyalty set in the midst of his egotism, like a vein of pure marble amongst a mass of sandstone. 'To benefit the House Fritz would let himself be

brayed in a mortar,' his brother had often said of him; in private life, on the contrary, he was entirely self-absorbed, as became a man who was one of the most notable persons in Paris; he had never been known to lend a five-franc piece, but he gave choice dinners three times a week, which cost twenty napoleons for each guest.

Sometimes he thought with a pang of terror of what would become of the House of Othmar when he himself should be no more. He was seventy years old; he would be unable to live for ever; his arsenal of wires contained no ivory button by which he could summon eternal life; he had gout in his system, and he did not disguise from himself that any day his cook, with the silver saucepans, his pretty aquarelles, his gigantic operations, his intense love of life, might one and all be powerless to keep him in his place, and then!—all the magnitude and might of the House of Othmar would depend solely and entirely on one capricious and unstable young man, who only cared for a Greek poet or a German opera!

On these melancholy days when he remembered this, he voluntarily deprived himself of his burgundy, and ate only of two dishes.

He was much attached to Othmar, but he was impatient of him. He was annoyed by what he looked upon as his crotchets and caprices; he was irritated by the unconcealed apathy and even scorn with which his nephew regarded his own superb position in the world. The dissatisfaction with which the origin of their House fill the head of it was to Baron Fritz almost incomprehensible and whimsical squeamishness. If he revered anything in life, it was the tradition of old Marc Othmar amassing his florins in the half-barbaric city of Agram.

'For aught we know he was a Tchigan, a Romany,' his nephew had said to him once; and he had replied angrily, 'And if he were a gipsy? Is there blood more ancient? Is there a people freer? Is there an intelligence more complex? What are the European races beside the Oriental? But you know very well that he was a pure Croat,' he had concluded, with intolerable impatience of such depreciation of the founder of their greatness.

Although it had been the habit of his life to follow and study the minds of men even in their more secret thoughts, he had no patience to attempt to understand the caprices of his nephew's. It was, he thought, that kind of ingratitude to fate which is almost an insanity; the same sort of fractious wilfulness which made James of Scotland love to wander disguised in his own towns, and sent Domitian to a plot of cabbages.

To Baron Fritz the power and might of the House he belonged to had ever been in the stead of any other religion, creed, or attachment; he was not personally an ambitious or an avaricious

man; he had effaced himself for his brother's sake, as he still slaved for his brother's son; the celebrity of the House of Othmar, their power, heavy as an elephant's tread, subtle as an electric current, the magnitude of the operations which they either undertook or impeded, the respect with which Europe regarded them, the weight of their own smile or frown—all these things were the very breath of his life to him. He had remained, and always willingly remained, a subordinate; he had never resented the superiority of his elder brother in power and position; all he had cared to do was to give his years to the service and aggrandisement of his race; he would have been very astonished if he had been told that it was in its way, after all, chiefly a form of sentiment which actuated him.

Between himself and Othmar there was the affection of consanguinity, but no sympathy whatever. To the elder man the younger seemed almost blasphemously unworthy of his heritage: the generosities and the scruples of such a *raffiné* seemed to him the perverseness of a child. Usually, Othmar willingly abandoned to him the guidance of their great argosy, freighted with the gold of the world, but twice or thrice since his majority he had interfered when he had considered a loan immoral or an enterprise corrupt, and had made his veto, as head of the House, obeyed forcibly. Those few times had been unpardonable to the Baron who had not his eccentric and quixotic principles.

'Affairs are affairs,' he said. 'If you conduct them according to the follies and phantasies of the story of Arthur—adieu.'

'I would willingly say adieu—an eternal adieu,' had retorted Othmar. 'But you have told me repeatedly that I cannot withdraw my House from business without causing ruin on the Bourses of Europe, and dishonouring our name by annulling and repudiating our engagements.'

'Of course you cannot,' had said the Baron, to whom the mere idea seemed like a preparation to blow up with dynamite all the mountains of Europe and of Asia. 'Do you suppose you can efface such an institution as our financial existence? You might as well say that a sovereign, by dying, could will his country into non-existence.

'Then as I cannot touch the engagements of the past, however much I condemn them, I will at least keep pure the obligations of the future,' Othmar had answered; and those transactions which his more delicate sense of honour did not allow him to approve he refused to permit to be undertaken.

Baron Fritz, who had the ordinary financier's conscience, that is, who would have done nothing commercially dishonourable, but who cared not a straw how iniquitous might be the results of an operation, so long as it was legal, clever, and lucrative, was beyond measure irritated by this occasional interference of one who was too fine a gentleman, too indolent a dreamer, to bear any of the

frets and burden of habitual attention to their gigantic operations. But there was no help for it; Otho Othmar was the head of the House, and, what was a greater grief still to his uncle, the only living one of the name besides himself. They, who could have given fortunes and position to a score of younger branches, who could have had their sons and brothers objects of power and worship in all the capitals of Europe, had been so visited by death and destiny that of them all there only remained the young man who was Othmar to all the world, and the old one who was Baron Fritz to his intimate associates, and Baron Friederich to all the Bourses.

'You should marry, Otho,' said the Baron to him now.

'I have no inclination to do so,' he answered, and thought of Nadine Napraxine.

'Inclination!' exclaimed the other irritably. 'What has inclination to do with it? Is inclination considered or waited for in the marriages of princes? You are a prince in your own way. If you died to-morrow, your race would be extinct.'

'That would not much matter,' said Othmar. 'We have never been conspicuous for anything except for amassing gold, as a ship's keel collects barnacles. I suppose I had better make a will. You shall have everything for your lifetime, and then it shall all go to the French Republic, which is the only national institution I know of that is capable of muddling away two hundred milliards in a year, with nothing whatever to show for it afterwards.'

Baron Fritz made a gesture of irritated contempt.

'You ought to have had legitimate heirs ten years ago. You do not belong to yourself. You have no right to live and die without raising up posterity.'

'I do not see the obligation,' said Othmar, 'and I do not care enough about the name, which you think so very fine, to greatly grieve over its probable extinction.'

Baron Fritz had heard this often, but he never heard it freshly without an inward shudder, such as a religious man feels before a blasphemy. Othmar, merely as a man, seemed to him a fanciful dreamer, an unsatisfactory anomaly, an unphilosophic thinker, whose theories were always playing the deuce with his interest, and whose sympathies ran away with him like half-broken horses. But Othmar, as the chief of his House, could do no wrong, and had to be obeyed, even if he rushed on his own destruction.

'You should marry for sake of posterity,' he reiterated. 'You are so happily and exceptionally situated that you can choose wherever you please. No living woman would refuse you. You should seek physical charms for sake of your offspring and high lineage also; the rest is a mere matter of taste.'

'The rest is only a trifle! Only character, mind, and feeling—the three things which determine happiness and influence life more than anything else.'

Baron Fritz made a little gesture of indifference: 'I imagine anyone *bien élevé* would not err in any of these points. Happiness one usually finds with the wives of others. Not that I would discourage you if you be inclined——'

'I am not inclined,' said Othmar, brusquely. 'I only say that character is never considered by men and women when they marry; yet it is what makes or mars a life. When a marriage is announced, what is discussed? The respective fortunes of those concerned, then their good looks or their lack of them; perhaps some one adds that he is *bon garçon*, or someone says *sa taille est jolie*, or, on the other hand, they may say he is a fool, or she has ugly feet; but you never hear a word as to their characters, their sympathies, or their principles. It is why all marriages are at best but a compromise between two ill-assorted dispositions.'

'Make yours well-assorted,' said Baron Fritz. 'If you attach so much to character, let character be your study; myself, I have always considered that marriage is a means of continuing a race, so that it legally can continue to transmit property; I have never known why people imported fine sentiments into a legal transaction. It is taking a false view of a social duty to look for personal pleasure out of it; indeed, if a man be in love with his wife he will probably communicate his passion to her, which is undesirable, because it awakens her senses, and ultimately leads to her taking a lover, or lovers, which again introduces uncertainty into the legal enjoyment and transmission of property.'

Othmar smiled: 'Really, Baron, you are the most profoundly immoral man I ever met. You would always, too, subordinate humanity to property. All human actions should, according to you, only tend to the consolidation and concentration of fortune; now, there is no possible theory of human action more demoralising.'

'That is a matter of opinion,' said the Baron. 'But unless your forefathers had carried that theory into practice, you would now be taming wild horses in Croatia, or probably you—Otho Othmar in your entity as you are—would not exist at all, for certainly your father would not have wedded with an English aristocrat.'

'It is a humiliating reflection,' said Othmar, 'that one's existence depended on the accidental union of two persons; indeed, I decline to believe it. I am convinced that the real *ego*, the impersonal entity which has been called the soul for want of knowing what to call it, must have had its own independent existence; the envelope it is slipped into is the accident; let us think so at all events. It is more consoling than your notion that the entire life of A. depended on the chance of B. cohabiting with C.; and that if B. had wedded D. instead, A. would never have existed at all, but another and totally different being would have done so—say Z.'

The Baron shrugged his shoulders. Why, he wondered, why on earth should a man care about a pre-existence, or a spiritual existence, at all, who had everything that his heart could desire

in his terrestrial life? He could imagine that starving poets or hungry theologians comforted themselves with those fancies, but Othmar!——

'You should have been a Montalembert or a Lamennais,' he answered, which was a polite way of saying that he was an imbecile.

'Without being either the one or the other, one may carry into private life the same sort of honour which even you think incumben on one in public life,' said Othmar.

'Not at all,' said his relative. 'The code for one has never been the code for the other. A man in private life may not send another man to be slain because it suits his purpose; a man in public life, that is, as a war minister or as an officer commanding-in-chief may send ten thousand, fifty thousand, men to certain slaughter. So has a diplomatist every title to lie as much as he may need to do in the public service, but he has no right to deceive his personal friend in a private matter. This is not mere casuistry; it is common sense. Indeed, all effective casuistry is based on common sense.'

'The most dangerous casuistry is so, no doubt,' said Othmar. 'Because when it is so based it is irresistible in its appeal to egotism.'

'I do not know why you use the word dangerous,' replied the Baron. 'Nothing is so wholesome as to teach men to take care of their own interests. If that lesson were universally understood, there would be neither paupers nor criminals.'

'We should have a world of bankers,' said Othmar. 'With all deference to you, even that would not be a Millennium.'

The Baron assented with good humour that it would certainly not be one, since there would be no investments of any kind possible.

The day was tedious to Othmar. He had to examine many projects, and append his signature to many documents. He had not disappeared into Central Asia for eighteen months without having brought upon himself the penalty of many arrears of affairs. His assent was merely *pro formâ*, but the formula was necessary.

'He is in love still with Madame Napraxine,' thought his uncle, finding his attention hard to fix. He was not sorry for that. At Othmar's age he was sure to be in love with someone, and the more he was in love the less likely was he to meddle with the transactions of the House.

The Baron could be excessively amusing, and was so this day of his arrival at S. Pharamond; but Othmar would gladly have been free of his presence. He knew that the old man would see at a glance, if he and Nadine Napraxine met before him, that time had not cured him of passion; and the malice and the contempt of his uncle were both disagreeable to him. Moreover, Othmar had been too perpetually agreed with all his life to be pleased by the constant enunciation of opinions and sentiments the reverse of his

own. There was that in the tranquil cynicism of Baron Friederich which left him with a sense of moral nausea. Men, it is true, were not worth much; but he could never get accustomed to the calm manner in which his uncle was habitually ready to sacrifice all their interests—their bodies, too, had there been any question of them—to what he considered advantageous to himself and to his House in public life and finance.

He did not care for the new Russian loan, for the new Turkish loan, for the great naval dockyards to be made by Germany on the Baltic, for the railway that was to be driven along the ancient bed of the Oxus, nor for the necessities of the empire of Brazil, nor for the development of Canadian forests. It did not interest him that such and such a sovereign would be a cripple without his help, or such and such a country as virtually in pawn to him as though it had been a pledged estate; that the assistance of his gold could enable a Ministry to keep its tenure of office, or the refusal of it could precipitate a State into revolution; to Baron Fritz it was like holding the reins of the universe, but to Othmar himself it was excessively dull work. The heir of four generations of money-lenders, he was absolutely indifferent to the immense power which lay in the stroke of his pen; the genius of finance was inherited by him, though dormant in him; even his uncle did justice to the accuracy of his vision, to the certainty of his instinct; but it was genius unused; he had no taste to employ its capacities. Europe was as indifferent to him as a mound of clay.

'We only do mischief, unmitigated mischief,' he asserted very often. 'Look at the Canal of Suez; it has only bred wars and pretexts for wars, and will probably embroil England and France for the next century—until, indeed, India shall have become Russian, or the African negro have avenged Abd-el-Kadir. Then again take the Panama project; it will set Great Britain and the United States at each other's throats like two bull-dogs.'

'You are enough to make your father rise from his grave,' said Baron Fritz.

'It is only aristocrats who do that,' returned Othmar. 'The financier sleeps sound on the remembrance of his own virtues—and loans.'

The memory of his father was bitter to him; he could not forget the injury done to him in his earliest youth by subjecting him to the charms and the corruptions of Sara Vernon.

'You must marry, and then you will see things differently,' his uncle insisted, reverting to the simplicity of reiteration.

What a cruel thing was destiny! Thousands of men who had not a crust of bread begat legitimate offspring in the most reckless and profuse manner; and the one man for whom lawful heirs were an absolute necessity and duty obstinately neglected his obligations to family and to the world.

It was possible, even probable, that the last of the Othmars would remain the last of his race.

'Marry for me,' said Othmar. 'I will give all we possess to any cousins you may give me, and keep only enough myself to live peaceably in Arabia Felix. I have always wished to live there; the climate is divine; and, after all, there is nothing that is of so much consequence as climate.'

'You will always jest!'

'Most people say I am too serious. I am not jesting at all. We have all a sort of superstition that we must live in Europe, but it is only a superstition. There is a great deal finer weather elsewhere, and without fine weather life is intolerable.'

'Have you never seen a woman you would marry?' asked Baron Fritz.

'Perhaps I have,' said Othmar, who never lied. 'But never one I could marry.'

'Ah!—someone else's wife! That is just like you. If she were not unattainable she would have no more attraction than anyone else. You are so whimsical.'

'I hope not. I dislike whimsical people. They are always asking for the windows to be shut, or imagining that there is a drainpipe open. Oh! some day I may marry. I do not pledge my future. But I have no inclination to marriage, and you will confess that you preach what you do not practise.'

'I am seventy-one and you are thirty-two,' said Baron Fritz; 'I should have married fifty years ago if I had been as you are, the head of the House.'

'Curse the House!' said Othmar, though he was a man who never used any oaths, great or small. But it seemed to him that the House of Othmar was for ever on his shoulders like Sindbad's burden; that he could do nothing freely as other men did; that go where he would he could never wholly escape from the mephitic acid which adulation and importunity exhale, and could never gain that simplicity of existence which, precisely because it was denied to him, seemed to him the chief good on earth.

'You speak as if the Othmars had been Plantagenets or Comneni!' he continued. 'It is not quite two centuries ago that the world did not even know that a Croat horse-dealer bore that name! The last time I was at Agram, I looked into the archives of the city; nobody ever did so; they were crabbed and hard to decipher; but I passed a day over them when it was raining and blowing so hard that there was not a soul abroad in the streets except the sentries. In the municipal documents for the year 1730 I found an account of a famine which had been the result of floods such as we have seen in our own day, for science, after all, makes little way against natural catastrophes. It was during this famine, when every grain of wheat was worth treble its weight in gold, that your hero Marc Othmar made his first great *coup*.

He had amassed money before, but this was the grand conception which first largely enriched him. He had bought enormously in corn, foreseeing a wet season and bad harvests. He had more than he had hoped for—he had the whole country under water. He had almost a monopoly of grain. In those days Government aid could not come by steam, and, besides, Croatia had just then no Government. In these records it is stated that upwards of forty-five thousand persons, chiefly women and children, died of starvation; and all the while they were dying Marc Othmar shut up his grain and only sold it sack by sack, at an average rate of a death a bushel. You find that admirable; I do not. I confess, ever since I put these facts together out of the fragments of public history, it has seemed to me as if there were an earthy smell about all our money; you know the lungs of people who die starved always do smell like decaying mould. It is pure fancy—I am quite aware of that. But even putting fancy out of the question, I do not see anything heroic about the figure of our founder. He is not Hugh Lupus or Godfrey de Bouillon.'

Baron Fritz's patience had scarcely endured the strain upon it.

'I never heard the story. I believe you have invented it,' he said irritably. 'If it be true, we have no explanation, so we cannot form a correct judgment. At the most, accepting it as you relate it, no more was done then by Marc Othmar than every farmer or peasant proprietor in Europe and America does whenever he gets a chance. Not so much as was done by Ferdinand de Lesseps when he sacrificed the fellahs to make his Egyptian Canal. You cannot conduct any trade on abstract principles or æsthetic moralities. You must buy cheap and sell dear, or commerce falls to the ground, and the whole superstructure of society falls with it. As the lawyer cannot refuse to conduct a case because he disapproves of the morality of it, so a financier cannot let pass a favourable operation because he may not approve entirely of its scope; all he has to examine are its wisdom and utility. When once you enter the region of motives and of principles, all is confusion. No two men have the same views as to what is right; you must proceed on broader lines than those of fanciful ethics. For instance, nothing is more clearly immoral than the marriage of two diseased persons, but the priest or the mayor who should refuse to perform the ceremonies demanded of him because he conceived that the bodily health of the people who came before him was unsatisfactory would be clearly overpassing the boundaries of his functions, which are limited to the consideration of simply legal obstacles. So, a man of business who once concerns himself with the vague moralities of his speculations is lost; all he has to occupy himself with is their solvency, their legality, and their probabilities of success or failure. Marc Othmar, no doubt, regarded his investments in corn in that purely practical light.'

'For a very clever man as you are,' returned Othmar, 'you are

curiously unconscious of what a satire your theories are on all that you most admire. I am as entirely convinced as you can be that Marc Othmar never gave a thought to the twenty-five thousand people who starved to death while his corn was shut up in granaries and barges; all the difference between us is, that you think this singleness of eye for his own interest was heroic, and I think it was not so—that it was even as near true hellish wickedness as humanity can go.'

'There is neither wickedness nor virtue in questions of finance,' said Baron Friederich, with distress at his nephew's obtuseness.

'There is certainly no virtue,' said Othmar.

'Neither wickedness nor virtue,' repeated the Baron. 'They are pure abstractions, like political economy. To talk of the immorality of a speculation is like talking of the vices of a rock-crystal. There is only one sin in a financial operation; it sins if it be unsound.'

'Financial morality, then,' said Othmar, 'has at least this advantage over social morality, that it is very much simplified!'

'It is simple as your stable's doctrines,' replied the Baron. 'If a horse be sound, he is a good horse; if he be not sound, he is a screw; nothing can be simpler. And the moment that a man begins to confuse himself with asking any more complex questions than this one, "Is it sound?"—whether he engage in a great operation of finance, or whether he be only buying a roadster, he will be inevitably bewildered with his own multiform requirements and will fall into the hands of mere persuasive sharpers.'

'I can buy a horse,' said Othmar, 'but I will leave finance to you.'

'Not always,' said Baron Fritz, grimly, with vivid recollections of more than one occasion on which his nephew had interfered with a peremptory veto to prevent some contemplated operation of which the morality was more doubtful than the expediency. The occasions had been rare indeed; but they had left an ineffaceable soreness on the mind of the elder man; nay, he would scarcely have forgiven them had it not been that his devotion to Otho as the head of the House had something of the irrational and patient loyalty which the Russian nation renders blindly to its unseen Tzar.

As for Othmar himself, he was too impatient of his uncle's laxity of principle and conscience to do full justice to the fine qualities which accompanied these.

Those huge stone palaces whose portals bore the magic name of Othmar were sacred to Baron Fritz as his temples to a Greek. His nephew never passed through the great doors of any one of them without a sense of impatience, of distaste, without a remembrance of the twenty-five thousand people who had died of hunger in Croatia whilst Marc Othmar was building up his piles of ducats and florins. The very homage with which he was himself met

within their walls irritated him. He thought of all the debasing worship the earth has seen the worship of riches was the most corrupt. 'If I were a leper they would kiss my ulcers so long as my hand could sign a cheque,' he thought. After all, when Marc Othmar had used up human lives in the furnace of his speculations he had used up material which was but of little worth.

Yet despite the disdain which human nature cannot do otherwise than awaken in those who are the objects of its adulation if they keep their senses clear amidst the incense fumes, his heart was empty.

'You have people here to-night?' asked the Baron, a little later, his vigilant eyes perceiving the preparations which were being made in the little theatre attached to the château.

'To-morrow night,' answered Othmar. 'A small dinner; I hope you will remain for it. And as Talazac, Sembrich, and other good singers are at Nice *disponibles*, we shall have some music afterwards and a few people; for that you will not care.'

'The Napraxines are here?' inquired his uncle, with a little smile.

Othmar was annoyed to feel that he changed colour despite himself, as he answered in the affirmative.

'Have you seen her?' said Friederich Othmar, carelessly. 'How do you find her? *Maladive* as usual?'

'There is no woman living less *maladive*,' said Othmar, with some irritation. 'She is glad to make the care of her health a pretext when she is disinclined for the world; that is all.'

'Ah, indeed?' said the elder man. 'All great rulers are allowed to be ill at their own convenience. Will she be ill or well to-morrow night?'

'Time will show,' replied Othmar, in a tone which closed the subject.

CHAPTER X.

It was a tiny church which bore the name of S. Cecilia at S. Pharamond, and was perched on an olive-covered knoll, with the rolling woods of the château d'Othmar at its base and the gardens of Millo on its right. Nicole Sandroz and a few other families of the *petite culture* gathered there on Sundays and holy days; but the great people of Millo, with their household, had their own private chapel, and the friends to whom Othmar had lent his house had never troubled themselves to find their way to the little whitewashed, wind-blown sanctuary and the lowly presbytery that leaned up against its south wall.

Othmar himself, who had a score of ecclesiastics in a score of

places looking to him for support, had hardly known that this little church and its old purblind peasant-born curé were upon the confines of his estate. He had paid every year a large sum for the maintenance of S. Pharamond, as for that of each of his houses and estates, but he had never examined the details of the expenditure. The advantage of an immense fortune is that you can leave all such matters to your secretaries. He paid them more heed than many would have done because of the views he entertained on the duties of saving other people from temptation; but S. Pharamond, with all its luxuries, elegancies, gardens, carriages, and conservatories, was only to him as a mere cottage, a mere toy. He had, indeed, almost forgotten that he had owned it, until, beating up the Bay of Genoa in a storm-tossed and almost disabled vessel, he had suddenly remembered that somewhere on this coast which slid away in the dusk to the westward he had a harbour and a quay all his own if he chose to go thither.

The little church was ugly, poor, and had been built since the Revolution; all that redeemed it was a great climbing rose which covered the whole of its front, and was even flinging audacious branches upwards to the cross upon the roof. In summer the rose made the little plain square place a glory of pink bloom. Inside there were a few deal benches, a few bad prints, a humble little altar, and some pewter candlesticks; the presbytery was equally as bare.

The old vicar lived with one servant as old as himself; he toddled out amongst the farms, and was scouted and scowled at by some of the peasants, petted and welcomed by others. He did no harm, and was quite happy if one of his parishioners gave him a basket of figs or a dish of seakale; he could almost have counted his flock on his fingers. The men about there were very radical and hard-headed; they were all small proprietors, who cursed Millo and S. Pharamond all the year round, though neither the villa nor the château did them the slightest harm. On the contrary, the stewards of both the Duc de Vannes and Othmar had orders to give away any rare seeds, aid in any irrigation-works, or contribute to any need that there might be in the neighbourhood. But the Duc was a duke and peer of France, and Othmar was a archimillionaire; the *petite culture* hated the sight of their gilded bronze gates and their glittering high-pitched roofs.

'It is for you that we pay taxes!' snarled one of them once to the Duc de Vannes, who laughed and answered:

'Oh, my friend! if we compare notes I think you would find that it is I who pay them for you and yours. I have not the slightest objection to do so, only do not let us misrepresent matters.'

But they did not want logic, and they hated the steep shining roofs and the gates with the gilded scroll work. What they did

not hate was Yseulte de Valogne; all countess though she was, they pardoned her that defect because she had always remained for them *la pétiote de Nicole*. They understood that she was to be sacrificed to the pride of her relatives; that because she was poor, so poor, she was to be refused all the joys of her youth and her sex, and surrendered to the Church that she might not offend the grandeur of her family by making a portionless marriage. This, which they had learned, with many exaggerations of its enormity from Nicole and from the servants of Millo, gave her the halo of a martyr in their eyes; she was sacrificed to the *noblesse*, and that fact was enough to make her sacred to them even though she belonged to the detested order herself, and had not a little of its hauteur. Besides, her tenderness to their old people, the little gifts she made at the convent and brought to their little ones and their women, her intrepidity in cases of sickness in those winters when she was alone at Millo—a mere child, but with the courage of giants, as Nicole loved to tell—all these, joined to her personal elegance, which made her as unlike themselves as the orchids in Othmar's hothouses were unlike the sweet peas and the lavender growing under their peach trees, had combined to make of the last Comtesse de Valogne the idol of that *petite culture* which, with few exceptions, loathed and execrated the brilliant idlers who rode and drove out of the gates of Millo, and carried their light laughter, their painted fans, their blazing jewels, their grace and their luxuries, out on to the illuminated terraces, under the palms and the araucarias, amidst the lamps and the music, regardless of the people in the distant huts and houses on the surrounding hills who, rising to their work as they went to their beds, swore savagely against them with all the unchanged rancorous class-hatred of the Terror still alive in them and unsatisfied.

'But, Nicole,' the girl said often to her foster-mother, 'if there were no rich people, no great people, who would buy your *primeurs*, your December peas, your January asparagus?'

'We should eat them ourselves,' said Nicole, sternly.

'You might do that now; but I do not think that eating them would pay you for all they cost you,' said Yseulte, not very sure of her ground, and therefore timid in treading it.

'We should not grow them; there would be no need to grow them,' said Nicole, obstinately. 'Everybody would have his cabbage in his pot if there were not those pestilent aristocrats and rich folks.'

'But you might plant cabbages now,' insisted her *pétiote*. 'Why should you not plant cabbages everywhere now if you like? Only you always say it is only the *primeurs* that pay well.'

'Oh, *ma mie*, you belong to them, so you defend them!' grumbled her foster-mother, finding the argument go against her. 'And what are they going to do with you? Cut off all your

beautiful hair, and cram you between four stone walls all your life, because it suits their pride to get rid of you!'

'One cannot live better than in God's service,' said Yseulte, with a passing blush.

'Oh, yes, one can,' muttered Nicole, 'when one is sixteen years old and has a face like yours; one could have a gallant lover, and a loyal lord, a home of one's own, and children one after another at one's breast.'

A colour like that of the red winter roses which she was binding up for the Nice markets came into the girl's cheeks.

'I am quite happy to dedicate my life to our Mother and her poor,' she said, in that tone which always awed and silenced Nicole. 'All that I fear is, not to be worthy. There have been holy women of my race. I may never content them as they watch me from their places at God's right hand.'

The coarse blunt fashion of speech of her foster-mother, and the crude class-hatreds and political animosities which Nicole had imbibed from her husband, often pained and offended the delicacy and the pride of the girl; but the rough woman loved her, was almost the only creature that did love her, save some of the younger children in the convent; and Yseulte bore with her faults with that indulgent affection which is not blind, but patient and ever forgiving.

She spoke in simplicity and sincerity; she had been so drilled to behold her only future in the religious life, that she prayed night and day to be worthy of such election; and if a thrill of longing for unknown freedom, for unimaginable joys, sometimes came over her she loyally stifled it ere it could grow to any strength. From her babyhood she had been taught to consider herself consecrated to the Church, and that knowledge had always kept her a little apart from others, made her more serious, more sensitive, more meditative, than her age usually is.

'And, to be sure, if there be any up there who do know, it is a crying shame that they do not interfere,' muttered her foster-mother, only half abashed. But Yseulte did not hear her: she had let the roses lie on her lap, her hands were motionless, her eyes were looking far away, farther than the snow which crowned the distant mountains; she was thinking of that saint by whom her childhood had been sheltered; could it indeed be that so great a love as her grandmother's had been had perished utterly, had gone whither it knew nothing, saw nothing, had no power to warn or save? If it were so, she was alone indeed. But——

'Nay, do not think of them,' said Nicole, roughly; 'what is dead is dead, my sweet; be it a pig or be it a princess, when the life is out the sense is out with it; it rots, but it does not wake.'

'Hush!' said the girl, with a little frown and a sense of pain, as if she had heard some foul irreverence. The dead were all she had to care for: half her young life was passed in thinking of

them, in praying for them, in wondering if they approved that which she did. 'Christ will give you your dower,' her grandmother had said often to her, a little seven-year-old child, who had vaguely understood that her future was pledged to heaven; and that she must never be fractious, or noisy, or sullen, or give way to appetite or mischief as other children did who were less honoured. It had made her neither affected nor hypocritical; only pathetically doubtful of herself and capable of repressing her naturally buoyant spirits with an incredible patience which was almost heroism, but went always unrewarded.

Faïel was a part of the old world of Bretagne, where the land is green and deeply wooded, and the days are misty and soft and still; it lies inland, and has no sight of the sea; it is traversed by narrow roads sunk down low between moss-grown walls of verdure; it seems all covered up with moss and ferns and boughs; there is always moisture in the air and there are almost always clouds in the sky, but it is a sweet, tender, if mournful country, and in the late-arriving spring becomes a very bower of flowers.

In the heart of this green country the ancient village of Faïel held the equally ancient convent of the Holy Ladies of St. Anne, with its long grey stone walls, its steep shining metal roofs, and its high belfry with its cross of gilded brass towering above the low quaint cottages which crept humbly up beneath it many centuries ago. The foundation owed its origin to Anne of Bretagne herself, and year after year, century after century, undisturbed by wars or revolutions, and unreached by any change of thought or manners, the pious ladies of Faïel, in their habits of black and white, had reared the young daughters of the Breton nobility and gentry in the ways of God, and in such secular learning as seemed not too profane. The community was severe in its rules and austerely simple in all its customs; but the children were happy if not gay; the green, leafy, silent country was between them and the world, the sisters were kind and gentle, the young girls murmured together, joyously, unreproved, like young swallows chirping under the eaves in midsummer. This holy house in pious Morbihan was wholly unlike those fashionable convents of Paris, and near it, where all the pomps and vanities of the world find their way, and its jealousies and its rivalries fret and fume in miniature mimicry. The Dames de Ste. Anne had all the primitive faiths, the unblemished loyalties, the devout beliefs in tradition of the Middle Ages; they taught the history of France from religious instead of secular records, and the history of the saints from the Golden Legend; they worked silver lilies on white banners, and in their chapel every day a Mass was said for Henri Cinq. Their little maidens became under their hands simple, earnest, grave, and most innocent and truthful creatures, ignorant, no doubt, in many things, but possessing a perfect courage and a beautiful candour; such maidens as in the old days,

from the Combat des Trente to Quiberon, had become the wives and mothers of the Breton seigneurie, and had, if need were, defended a castle and headed a sally of men-at-arms in the holy cause of their duke or of their king; women like the arum lilies that covered the damp green earth in their native woods; women whose eyes look at us still, serious and serene, from the gold blazonries of illuminated missals, where their miniatures have been painted beneath their scutcheons and their crowns.

Of these children, when they had passed from the gates of Faïel for the last time, some went to pass all their years in the small secluded châteaux or the dull stone-built towns of the sea-shore or the interior; some, finding a wider flight, a bolder fate, went into the life of the world and lived that life. But wherever they went, whatever they became, none of them ever wholly forgot Faïel; all of them when they bore children said, as they looked on their little daughters, 'They shall go to the Dames de Ste. Anne;' so that generation after generation came to the great Gothic gateway, and passed within and dwelt there for eight or ten peaceful years; and the sisters, though death made changes amidst them, yet seemed always the same.

Yseulte, who was a fanciful child like most of those who have a lonely childhood, used to believe that they were like that woman of the time of Clovis who learned the secret of eternal life from listening to the singing of the forest birds.

She used to look through the grating down the deep green shade of the woods without, and think, 'That is why they live so long, why they are always content.'

One day an old peasant, who was called a witch in Faïel, saw her looking so and heard her say something of her thoughts to her companion, and the old crone shook her head wisely. 'Do not wish to live long; wish to live so that you have all heaven in one hour; it is not the birds, nor is it the woods, nor is it the saints, that will give you that.'

'What does she mean?' said Yseulte.

'In the village they say she has been a wicked woman,' said the girl who was beside her.

Yseulte pondered often on the mysterious words, but she could never understand them.

At Faïel her days and years went by without any sorrow, if without any pleasure save such as youth and perfect health and willingness to accomplish all allotted tasks can bring with them. She always wore grey or black or white; no colours were ever seen, no ornaments were ever allowed within the sacred walls. She was regarded as certain to enter the religious life. '*Tu seras des nôtres*,' said the nuns so often to her that before she was ten years old she had grown so imbued with the idea that she had never dreamed of resisting such a destination. Her life was so entirely simple, in a way so barren, that the spiritual world

assumed a proportion in it which would have been morbid had not the high courage and bodily healthfulness of her resisted the gloom which those who had to do with her deemed most fitting to the loneliness of her lot. She came of a race of gay nobles, of reckless soldiers, of high-handed seigneurs, and some instincts of their courage, of their temper, of their imprudence, stirred in her now and then beneath the calm of cloistral habit and the spirituality of her natural temperament.

'Do you think the daughter of Gui de Valogne will ever be a saint?' the Duc de Vannes often said to his wife. He thought that blood would out even beneath the coif of a Carmelite. His wife replied that the Valogne had always kept their women pure, if at the sword's point, and that amongst them there had been more than one canonised; besides, she added, Yseulte was a child both grave and good; she would never know the world or its temptations; she would live and die as a lily did in a convent garden.

The Duc shrugged his shoulders:

'She has her father's blood in her,' he said, 'and he would have suited no cloister but Roissy or Medmenham.'

He believed in very few things, but his one belief was his conviction that the bias of a race goes with it as do its diseases or its excellences. Most racing men are implicit believers in hereditary influence, and the Duc, who had bred winners at Chantilly and at Ascot, did not credit that the daughter of Gui de Valogne would contentedly become a Ste. Catherine or a Sœur Rose.

'Of course you may shut her perforce in a religious house; so might you shut her in a coffin. To be sure, the one murder is legal and the other would not be so,' he said, with some ill-humour, the night after Othmar noticed his young cousin with her long black gloves, her stately curtsey, her sash *à l'enfant*, and her beautiful figure, which had the slimness of a child and the promise of a goddess.

'I believe you are almost in love with her yourself,' said the Duchess.

'I wonder no one else is wholly,' he answered, with petulance; and he wrote to his jeweller in the Rue de la Paix for a locket, a girl's locket; something with pearls. He thought even a Mother Superior could hardly object to pearls.

Yseulte, all unconscious of the perilous honour projected for her by her cousin's lord, passed the whole day up at the little church, arranging the flowers which Othmar had given her in the morning, and others which his men, by his orders, had brought thither in the forenoon. She was happier than she had been since her grandmother had died. A warm human interest had come suddenly into the monotony and solitude of her existence. She worked at the decoration of the little place with ardour and delight. She had never before possessed such flowers as these; the woods had

yielded all those which had ever decked the altar of the chapel at Faïel. She had only seen such gorgeous blossoms as these in the glass-house at Millo, where she would no more have dreamed of gathering them than of wearing her cousin's diamonds,

'He shall see how beautiful it looks to-morrow,' she thought with each blossom that she added, each leaf she touched. That he would come she never doubted; a promise, ever such a little one, was so sacred to herself that for any pledge to be forgotten would have seemed to her quite impossible.

The old vicar came and went, the sacristan and the housekeeper stood and chattered and told her for the hundredth time all their household troubles; the gay sunshine streamed in past the open door and through the dulled grey glass of the small windows, a goat trotted up the aisle and nibbled at the bay boughs which she had tied together. The morning passed like a pleasant dream; it seemed not December to her but May. She was but a child, and for once the weight of her future fell off her young shoulders. She laughed—softly, because she sat on the altar steps—but she laughed. 'God is so good,' she thought, in the simple sincerity of her glad gratitude.

'You will let me sing, my reverend, at all the offices?' she said to the old man when she had finished her welcome labours and stood with him within the stone porch whilst the sun was setting.

'Surely, my child,' he said willingly. 'It does me good to hear your voice, and I think it must even be pleasant to the angels too.'

She went happily along the uneven little path which led down the hill under great olive trees and warm evening sunset skies to Millo. Her feet went so rapidly that the maid whose duty it was to attend her out of doors could ill keep pace with her. Her heart was so light; she had the vision of the beautiful flowers always before her eyes, of the altar which she had made like a garden. It mattered nothing to her that when she entered the house she was met by a reprimand, that she found her simple supper cold, that her little cousins were malicious, quarrelsome, unkind; all those were trifles. She bore them with perfect patience, and with never a word of harsh reply; and she went to her bed and slept soundly, dreaming of roses and lilies, and S. Cecilia, and of a world of angels who leaned on the sunbeams as on golden spears, and looked down on her and smiled.

She was up long before the first gleam of coming day lightened the eastward seas. No one ever forbade her going to the church as often as she chose; they deemed it in unison with her future vocation. She had attached herself to this rude, lonely, little place in the winters which she had passed there under the charge of Nicole Sandroz. Her cousin had said once that it would be better if she attended instead the offices of the house chapel, but

she had not insisted, and the child, who had a certain obstinacy in her affections, had persevered in her loyalty to the parish church under its silvery mist of olives.

This morning her foster-mother was in waiting to accompany her. The cold was keen in the greyness of the dawn; the sun which at noon would vivify the winter landscape to summer-like warmth, was still hidden in the nether world, the earth and the sea were dark, the stars still lingered in the shadowy skies.

'What folly, *pétiote*!' muttered Nicole, who had her lanthorn, 'to get up out of your bed to go and sing an ave! If it were to pack a crate of oranges there would be some sense!'

'Hush, please,' said Yseulte gently. 'Perhaps grandmère hears.'

The memory of the old Marquise always touched and silenced the irreligious grumbling of Nicole. She said nothing more, but toiled on stoutly, her lanthorn twinkling amongst the rough grass, white with passing frost.

'The child would be best in her bed,' she thought; 'but there is one thing—she never takes cold. One would like to think the saints had a care of her, but that is all rubbish; even our mayor says so now, and he is such a dunderhead, what he cannot stomach nobody can.'

Still Nicole, who came to Mass for her sake, though the good woman in her soul hated the bigots, the black-beetles, of the Church, held on her way up the hill, stumbling over the roots of the old olives; it pleased the *pétiote* that she should come, and after all it could do no harm.

Eager, proud, joyous—more joyous she feared than was meet for the sanctity of the hour and the errand—Yseulte led her into the church as the first pale light of daybreak spread itself over the earth.

'Now you will see how beautiful it is!' she murmured to Nicole.

Alas, the fair garden she had made and left at twilight was a ruin now! Where she had caused the metal and the wood and the stone to bloom as with the blossoms of Paradise, there were only poor pale yellow withered things colourless as ashes!

The frost of the night had stolen the glory from the flowers as the hand of the Church would strike the youth from her life and leave it hard and dumb as a stone. The blossoms had died of cold like little children lost in the snow, like bright butterflies beaten down and drowned in a storm of hail.

A low pathetic cry of grief escaped her as she saw the lovely things, which she so ignorantly and innocently had slain, hanging their folded petals in the chill glimmer of the early day as the limbs of infants hang in death.

Her eyes filled with hot quick tears that ran down her cheeks.

'Oh, look! Oh, look!' she cried piteously.

'What could you expect, *pétiote*,' said Nicole with rough sympathy, 'if you bring hothouse flowers from under their glass? Our nights are cold—my man said last night it was two below zero by the mercury tube in our wall. Do not cry, *mignonne*; you could not help it; you did not think of it; children never do think. But bay and laurel and all those common shrubs are best fit to stand the cold of the church. These things are only aristocrats.'

Nicole checked herself; she remembered the Marquise de Creusac, with the frost of poverty and cruel loss upon her, meeting misfortune with serene courage and unchanging dignity; her comparison, she saw, halted and failed.

Yseulte did not hear; she was thinking piteously, 'And I did so want him to see how beautiful it all looked through his kindness!'

She was quite sure that Othmar would come to one office or another during the day. She was ashamed to be so occupied with this one thought when the drone of the acolyte was chanting in monotonous sing-song the opening words of the Mass; but it was stronger than herself. She thought of nothing else, to her own surprise and confusion; she was wholly unable to keep her mind to the holy offices of the hour; for the first time, the sonorous Latin words failed to carry her soul with them; she was glancing while she knelt at the closed rickety door, she was wondering whilst she sang the 'Agnus Dei,' would he come? She had taken such infinite pains with the flowers, and now all their beauty was gone!—they were only faded, helpless-looking, melancholy wrecks of themselves, disfiguring the altar rather than lending it grace and glory.

'*Pauvre pétiote*!' thought Nicole, fingering her beads, and bending her stiff knees from habit. 'The frost will come just like that to her, and nobody will care. Often have I a mind to go up to Millo and tell them it is a shame, a vile shame; but they would not care, they would have me turned out for an old mad woman.'

The church was very dark; the few lights there were did not dissipate the shadows of the dawn; the clear melodious voice of Yseulte rose in the gloom as a nightingale's does in the lovelier dusk of a midsummer daybreak.

All her heart thrilled out in it, and when the last notes sank to silence there was a tremor as of tears in them.

Nicole's heart swelled too as she heard, half with pain, half with rage.

'I would sooner she were singing "do', do', l'enfant dor'!" by her baby's cradle,' thought this heathen.

She attended every office of the church during the next twelve hours, but Othmar came not to one of them. With Vespers all

hope of seeing him there—such a vague, innocent, half-conscious hope as it was—had perished quite, like the orchids on the altar.

The day was over: the church had once more no light except that of its twinkling candles; the peasants shuffled to their feet and clattered out over the stones; Nicole began to chatter to the maid; the old vicar had tottered into the sacristy and was pulling off his vestments; the last office was done; the butterfly orchids were dying in the stench of the sputtering candlewicks; the acolyte—a ploughboy in a short linen tunic which showed his hobnailed boots—began to put the wicks out with a brass extinguisher fixed at the end of a long stick; she thought she would never bring flowers there any more—it was cruel—they withered and faded, and who could tell what they might suffer? She had never remembered that before.

The flowers had died in the service of the Church; so would she. It had seldom seemed hard before.

While the two women chattered in low tones of the doings of Millo, she turned quickly back to the altar-steps and knelt down there and said one last prayer confusedly, conscious that she had been at fault all through the Mass in thinking of other things than the holy service in which she had taken part.

She rose, with the tears in her eyes, and went out through the little dark aisle between the two women, leaving the poor lost flowers in a confused and shadowy mass upon the altar until dawn, to be tossed away and thrust out under the sacristan's broom to the dust-heap. Othmar had not come.

He was sitting at his own table, with the Princess Napraxine at his right hand.

The girl could see the lighted windows of his château as she walked down under the olives through the dusky furrows, already dotted with blades of corn, the women still chattering as they came behind her, the woods of Millo black under the moon, the stars shining, a distant watchdog giving tongue.

'You are late, *pétiote*,' said her foster-mother, kissing her hand at the door of the house. 'But it will not matter; they are all dining at Count Othmar's; if no one of those cats of gouvernantes tell the Duchesse, she will be none the wiser.'

'There is nothing to conceal,' cried Yseulte a little coldly. 'My cousin knows that I go out to Vespers as well as Mass. Good night.'

She kissed her nurse on the cheek, and went up the staircase of Millo. Her heart had contracted with a sort of pang as she heard the idle words, 'They are all dining at Count Othmar's.' She did not wonder that he had not invited her; no one invited her anywhere; she was a schoolgirl now, and would be a nun later on; she had nothing to do with the world, and yet her heart ached a little.

She did not touch the coffee and the cakes that her maid

brought her. She sat at the window of her own little room, and looked every now and then out into the chilly night and across the moonlit landscape to the towers of S. Pharamond. There were points of light of all colours sparkling in the darkness round the château. They were the lamps of his gardens, which were illuminated down to the very edge of the sea. She felt a great longing to cry like a little child ; but she would not yield to it. Only two great tears rolled slowly down her cheeks. She knew that she had been very foolish to expect him at the church ; only he had said that he would come!

CHAPTER XI.

A FEW mornings later, after his noonday breakfast, Alain de Vannes sauntered out into the rose gardens of his wife, having seen there the figure of his wife's young cousin in her demure grey dress with the cape of sable, which he was just then in the mood to think the prettiest female garb in the world. He went up to her with easy and good-humoured courtesy, as became her kinsman and her host.

'My cousin,' he said tenderly, 'you have no trinkets and pretty things, as a little lady of your years should have. I believe there are all that are left of the Valogne jewels waiting for you in strong coffers, but meantime here is a little bird that will whisper to you pretty things if you will listen to him. You may wear a dove, you know, at the convent itself. It is the bird of the Holy Spirit.'

And with that he gave her what he had telegraphed for from Paris, a locket of blue enamel rimmed with pearls, and a dove, made of pearls, flying on it; it hung from a thick gold chain.

She was so astonished that she could not speak.

The Duc watched her with amusement. 'Pardieu!' he thought, 'it is much more entertaining to give to the *ingénue* than to the *belle petite*. What wonder, what delight, what innocent gratitude! and the others only box your ears if the diamonds be not big enough or the emeralds do not please them. Really we are fools.'

Yseulte meanwhile had not spoken yet; what moved her so intensely was not the gift of the medallion itself, splendid though it was, but the idea that anyone had had so much remembrance of her. She had scarcely had more notice than a careless bow or a brief '*bon jour*' from her cousin's husband in all her life, and now he brought her this magnificent present! And yet, how much sooner she would have had Othmar remember to go and hear her sing!

'Well, *mignonne*,' said the Duc gaily. 'You look as if you were not sure whether you were in earth or in heaven. *We* are not, when we look at you.'

'It is most good of you; it is most beautiful,' she said, with hesitation. 'That you should have thought of me is so kind; but I fear I ought not to wear it; you know in two years' time I am to enter the Carmelite communion.'

'Nonsense! It is the bird of the Holy Spirit,' said de Vannes, with an ambiguous smile. 'I think you may wear it when you are an abbess—if ever you be an abbess. Ah, my child, it is a cruel thing to doom you to the religious life; only ugly women should go there, and you are so handsome, *fillette*—you will be so handsome!'

'Oh, no!' she said, quickly; she blushed very much; she had been always told that it was a sin to think of any physical charms, and yet she had enough of the instincts of a beautiful woman in her to take an unconscious delight in the whiteness of her limbs, the thickness of her hair, the smile of her own eyes from a mirror.

'Oh, yes!' said de Vannes, still with that smile which vaguely hurt her. 'You will be marvellously handsome, Yseulte; I think that is the chief reason why the ladies wish you in the cloister! It was certainly the reason why they would not take you to Othmar's last night. To be sure you are not in the world, but in the country they might have made an exception; you are seen in our drawing-rooms.'

She lifted her eyes with eager appeal. 'Did he ask me? Did he think of me?' she said, under her breath.

The keen glance of the Duc flashed over her face, and grew harsh and suspicious.

'Because he spoke to you once,' he thought, 'I suppose, though you be a young saint in embryo, you are not proof against his millions! You are all alike after all, you women, even in the bud.'

Aloud he said: 'Yes; I believe Othmar bade my wife bring you. Perhaps she thought it was too much like the great world for you; it was a brilliant affair—all done for the Princess Napraxine.'

'Who is the Princess Napraxine?' she asked, surprised at her own temerity.

'She is a lady of Othmar's dreams,' said de Vannes, with an unkind satisfaction. 'You are sure to see her here sometime. What did you think of him the other night? You know, I suppose, that he could buy up all France if he chose.'

'I did not know,' she murmured. 'Nicole, I think, said that he was rich.'

'Rich!' echoed the Duc, with derision. 'That is not a word to describe Othmar. He has about a million millions, and he would probably be happier if he were the blind beggar of the Pont Neuf.

His millions do not do anything for him with Nadine Napraxine, and it is only for Nadine Napraxine that he exists.'

Then he paused; the respect for *la jeune fille*, by which the most dissolute of his countrymen is restrained from long habit, making him repress the sentence he had on his lips; that momentary flush and light happiness at being remembered by Othmar which he had seen on his young cousin's face had made him bitter against his neighbour and friend, and he would willingly have continued his sarcasms on a man who, with all the world at his feet, cared only for another man's wife, who laughed at him.

Yseulte listened with serious and wistful eyes; she did not know enough of his meaning, nor enough of the sympathy which had attracted her towards Othmar, to understand why she felt a vague pain at hearing these things said of him mingled with a delighted gratitude that he had remembered her. It was not to have gone to his party that she cared for, but to be remembered by him.

The children and their governesses approached her at that moment, and the Duc somewhat hurriedly turned away.

'Do not let these fools see your locket,' he said quickly, meaning by that epithet the wise women who educated his daughters. 'If Cri-Cri notice it, tell her, of course.'

Yseulte, surprised at the injunction, looked at him in wonder; but she saw so much irritation in his expression that, being accustomed to obey the orders of others without comment, and to be taught that silence was one of the first duties, she put his gift in her pocket as the children approached, and their father, with a petulant word or two, turned away, lighting a cigar.

'What was *petit papa* saying to you?' cried the little sisters in a breath.

They were pretty children, with clouds of hair and saucy peevish little faces. They wore sailor dresses, made very short at the knee and showing legs very shapely though too thin. Blanchette was blonde; Toinon was a little darker and rosier. Blanchette was the more elegant and the more witty by far; Toinon was the sturdier and the naughtier. But Toinon had still something of childhood left in her; Blanchette had lost every atom of hers years before, though she was only ten years old now. Toinon loved horses, dogs, boats, and *le sport* generally; Blanchette only cared for smart frocks, things which cost a great deal of money, scandal which she overheard, and which fascinated her in proportion as it was unintelligible to her, and the sense that she was looked at admiringly as she drove behind the ponies in the Bois or walked, with a court of small boys behind her, down the planks at Trouville.

Between her two cousins and Yseulte de Valogne there was a great gulf fixed, that gulf into which there has fallen so much of the innocence of youth, of the grace of good manners, of the charm

of girlhood, and of the obligation of nobility; that gulf over which modern society dances so lightly, blind and indifferent to all it has lost.

'What was *petit papa* saying?' cried Blanchette and Toinon in one breath, their eyes wide open with curiosity and sparkling with suspicion.

Yseulte hesitated; she scarcely knew what to say, and a kind of oppression came upon her with the sense of the gift and the secret which she had to keep and conceal.

'He was telling me that I was invited—there—last night,' she said, as she looked across at the trees of S. Pharamond; 'but they thought me not old enough,' she added, with an unconscious sigh.

Blanchette turned up her little delicate nose in the air.

'*Grande nigaude, va*!' she said contemptuously. 'You will never be anything but a big baby, you! When I am as old as you, I shall have been married a whole year to a crown prince, and have gone to all the theatres, and read all the newspapers—every one!'

'But she will never see a newspaper, and never go to a theatre; never, never, never—a big never!' cried Toinon, who was two years younger than Blanchette, as she clapped her hands and capered.

'She does not care, she is such a stupid,' said Blanchette, with all the superiority of measureless scorn.

'Papa was giving you something: what did he give you? said Toinon. 'He said you were handsome the other night to mamma, I heard him. Mamma was angry.'

'Mamma did not care,' said Blanchette. 'If it had been the Marquis Raymond!'——

Then the little sisters laughed.

Yseulte with difficulty escaped from her little tormentors, and wandered alone through the pretty grounds; while the closed shutters of the villa of Millo showed that her cousin and her house-party were still sleeping after the cotillon with which Othmar's party had closed; an improvised and unexpected cotillon, for which, nevertheless, there had been all manner of admirable surprises, marvellous novelties, and costly presents.

When she was quite alone she took out her pearl medallion and looked at it with all a child's rapture at a toy and something of a woman's pleasure in a jewel. The kindness of her cousin de Vannes overwhelmed her. She had known him now and then, as she passed the doors of the billiard-room, or watched the drag roll out of the courtyard, give her a careless, good-tempered nod and a lazy word or two, but never any more notice than that, which was as much as Blanchette and Toinon ever received from him. At such times as he had come down to Bois le Roy or Millo, when she was there, she had heard of him as a man only devoted to horses and dogs, to sport of all sorts, to his stag-hounds

and boar-hounds and otter-hounds, to his coach and his stud and his great *chasses*; she knew that he was a very grand gentleman in Paris, and at Bois le Roy—despite all revolutions—was a kind of king. And he had thought about her so much that he had bought her a locket! She could scarcely believe it.

She sat in a little nook made by magnolias that overhung the sea, and saw the sun shine on her dove of pearls, and wondered if she would dare to wear it; would the Duchess approve of it? There was only one thing which disturbed her, it was his recommendation to silence; there had been a look in his eyes, too, when he had said, 'You are very handsome, *fillette*,' which haunted her with a vague uneasiness. She was too utterly innocent to be alarmed by it, but a certain instinct in her shrank from the remembrance of that regard. It was the first look of sensual admiration which had been ever given her, and though he had added, 'Of course you must tell Cri-Cri,' he had said it grudgingly, as though he would willingly, if he could have ventured to do so, have bidden her keep his gift a secret from his wife.

'Are you counting your jewels, Mademoiselle de Valogne?' said the voice of Othmar. 'Leave that until you are thirty years older and need their aid.'

Without any thought of her he had been strolling on the rocks above the little harbour which belonged equally to S. Pharamond and to Millo. He had been bathing and swimming, and was returning to his house, when he caught sight of her seated beneath the magnolias.

Yseulte coloured, and rose to her feet, dropping the medallion in her surprise as his voice startled her from her meditation. Othmar picked it up and returned it to her.

'What a happy trinket to hold your thoughts so long,' he said as he did so. 'I have been watching you for a quarter of an hour, and you have never ceased to look at that most fortunate jewel.'

'My cousin, the Duc de Vannes, gave it to me a moment ago,' she answered him, vexed that he should suppose she could care so much for any trifle.

'De Vannes!' echoed Othmar in some surprise; 'I did not know he had so much good taste in the selection either of his gifts or their recipients. It is a very pretty medallion,' he added, noticing her look of distress and of bewilderment. 'The dove is admirably done; I hope it will be an emblem of the peace which will always remain with you.'

She did not speak; the quick sensitiveness of her instincts made her feel the satire of his felicitations, and become conscious that for some reason or another he disapproved the gift which she had received.

'I have never had any present before from anyone,' she said simply, 'so it is a great pleasure to me. I do not mean only because it is pretty——'

'But because of the affection it represents? I understand,' said Othmar, while he thought to himself, 'That *goailleur* de Vannes!—must he even bring his indecencies to Millo and try and corrupt a poor helpless child? The man would not spend twenty francs out of mere good nature, nor look at her twice out of mere compassion.'

He looked at her himself now where she sat under the magnolia branches; and it seemed to him as if she were the dove and he saw the hawk descending. Alain de Vannes could be seductive when he chose; he was good-looking and extremely distinguished, was accustomed to conquest, and had that charm of manner which the habit of the world and the society of women make second nature. If his fancy had lighted on his wife's cousin he would not be likely to pause because she was penniless, lonely, and consecrated to a spiritual life.

'One ought to put her on her guard, and yet, who could venture to do that,' he thought; he, at all events, had no title to do so, and if he had, he could not willingly have been the first to tell her that under the roses there were vipers, that behind the dew and the sunrise there were evil fires burning.

'Will you stay long at Millo?' he asked abruptly.

'I came here for two months,' she said. 'We were all sent away—there was fever; I have been here often before. I am very fond of Millo.'

'Why would they not let you honour me last night?'

'I do not go into the world at all. I never shall.' She hesitated a moment, then added timidly, 'It was very kind to think of me.'

'It would not be easy to forget you,' said Othmar with a sincerity which surprised himself. 'I wish you had been with us; yours is the age for *sauteries* and enjoyment. I should like to see you at your first ball.'

'I shall never go to a ball. It would not be thought right.'

'And do you never rebel against so harsh a destiny?'

She coloured to her eyes as she answered almost inaudibly, 'Sometimes—yes—but then I know that it is I who am wrong and they who are right.'

'Who are they?'

'The Mother Superior; my uncle, de Creusac, by his will; my cousin Aurore; everyone that I belong to at all: my grandmother especially desired it.'

'It makes one wish all the world were agnostic!'

'What did you say?'

Agnostic was not a word she had been allowed to hear.

'I say that it is a cruel thing to force on you such a choice. At least you should be allowed to know what you do, ere you do it. You should see what the world is like before you renounce it. I can fancy that women tired, sorrow-laden, unlovely, unloved,

feeble of health, may be glad of the refuge of religious life; but you!——'

'Do you think one should only give God what is weary and worn out?' she said softly. 'Surely one should give one's best?'

Othmar was touched by the words and the tone. To him, whose boyhood had been filled with spiritual faiths and hopes, and whose manhood had the pain of knowledge that all these gracious myths and wistful desires were but mere dreams, there was the echo of remembered adorations, of exquisite unreasoning beliefs, in the simple answer which bespoke that faith in heaven which a child has in its mother, unquestioning, undoubting, implicit in obedience and in trust.

Beside the cultured mind of the woman he loved, with its fine scepticism, its delicate ironies, its contemptuous rejections, its intellectual scorn, no doubt this simple, narrow, and unintelligent faith was foolish and childish, and out of date; yet it touched him; in Yseulte de Valogne it had an unconscious heroism, a beautiful repose, which lifted it out of the cramped rigidity of creeds and the apathy of ignorance.

There were beneath her gravity and spirituality a warmth, a vitality, a latent force, which seemed to him to cry aloud for enjoyment and expansion. Sooner or later all that teeming life slumbering in her would awake and demand its common rights; no creature perfectly organised and full of health and strength can forego the natural joys of human existence without suffering a thousand deaths. As yet, no doubt, she was as innocent, as ignorant, of the tyranny of the senses, as any shell that lay at the bottom of the blue waters yonder. She might have fallen from heaven that day for aught she knew of all which, in her unconsciousness, she was ready to renounce. But any hour that divine innocence might be destroyed by a word, banished at a touch. Alain de Vannes, or any other, might choose to find sport in waking and in slaying it; and then, how unhappy she would be! How like a bird freshly captured, and beating itself to death against the bars!

It was only in France that a high-born and beautiful girl could be sacrificed thus because she had no dower. Everywhere else women without dowers were sought and taken in marriage every day. As if a few hundred thousand francs were needful to make youth, and loveliness, and purity, and high lineage, acceptable to men!

'You know my cousin the Duc very well?' she said timidly after a long silence.

'We have lived in the same world; I have not been intimate with him.'

'Do you think he would be very vexed if I asked Nicole—that is, my foster-mother—to sell this locket for me?'

'I fear he would not be best pleased. Why should you wish to sell it?'

She hesitated, then answered: 'I want to buy the vicar that new gown he wants so much. He will never spend a centime on himself, and his gown has been mended and mended and mended; it is all a patchwork, and even that is dropping to pieces, and the bishop's visitation is near at hand. I thought the value of this locket would buy a priest's gown, if my cousin de Vannes would not be angry.'

'That is a pretty thought of you; it would certainly buy many *soutanes*,' said Othmar. 'But I think Alain would not be at all pleased if you sold his present; and I told you the other day that I will give the curé a new gown myself with the utmost pleasure. You say that I belong to his parish.'

She smiled; nevertheless, she hesitated to accept his offer.

'You must have so many things to give. Nicole says that people are always asking you for things.'

'They do not always get them,' replied Othmar, with a smile. 'If they wished only for such useful and harmless things as *soutanes*, they should always have their wish.'

'Are you so immensely rich then?' she asked him, opening widely her golden-brown eyes, which looked as if the sunshine was always shining in them.

'To my misfortune,' said Othmar, annoyed. Could not even a child of sixteen out of a convent forget his riches? Was it possible she too was going to ask him for something?

She looked at him gravely.

'I wonder you do not build a cathedral,' she said, after a pause.

'A cathedral!' he echoed, in surprise. 'I would if I had the faith of those who used to do so.'

'It is what I would do if I had money,' said she, still very gravely. 'I would build one in the heart of a forest, with the deer and the birds all round it; not jammed up amongst streets and crowds like Notre-Dame or Chartres.'

Then a sudden sense came over her that she was violating all the rules of propriety by which her life was ordered in thus speaking out her thoughts to one who was almost a stranger; in tarrying at all by the side of a man who was of no parentage to her. She rose, a little hurriedly, but with the stately grace which was natural to her; the grace of old Versailles and Marly.

'I think I must go back to the house,' she said, with a little shyness. 'My cousin does not like me to be alone, or to talk to anyone ——'

'The Duchesse will not object to me,' said Othmar, with the same smile as he had had when using the same words a few days before. 'Besides, Mademoiselle, you are in another world than your convent. At Millo men are not thought dragons and tigers. We are poor creatures, indeed, but harmless; more injured than

injuring. Do not be so alarmed. I want you to tell me a great deal more about our vicar. Where am I to get his measure for his gown? Will he be surprised with it? Will you not let me send it to you that you may take it to him? I should be ashamed to do so. I have never been inside his church, even to hear you sing.'

'No, you never came yesterday!' she said, with a sigh, innocently revealing that she had remarked his absence with regret.

'To my shame and loss, I did not. I had my uncle with me all the day, and at night a dinner, a concert, and the *sauterie*, to which I hoped you would have been brought.'

'But I cannot dance,' said the child, blushing very much as she made the humiliating confession.

'So much the better,' said Othmar, inconsistently; 'I am sure, however, that you would dance with admirable grace if you danced at all. Anyone who moves well can dance well.'

This time the colour in her cheeks was that of pleasure at his praise. She was silent, looking at him a little wistfully, recalling what de Vannes had said of the Princess Napraxine.

The kindliness of his tone, its mingling of familiarity and reverence, melted her reserve and disarmed her shyness. There had been that in the compliment of Alain de Vannes which had startled and alarmed her; but in the almost paternal gentleness and friendliness of Othmar's words there was nothing to do so. He had little to her of the chillness and languid irony which often frightened even women in him, whilst he had all the graceful courtesy of a man polished by all the habits of the great world, and accustomed to that pre-eminence which gives supreme ease of manner. To her Othmar seemed a hero, a king, an ideal among men; when her cousin had said to her that this person, so powerful, so great, and so rich, was also unhappy, he had said the only thing needed to complete his fascination for her and to make him the master of her dreams.

He bowed low before her with a sense of something holier than was often met with in this world, and looked after her as she sped over the lawns to the house.

'A beautiful creature, with a tender heart in her breast,' he thought. 'Why could I not meet her and find my heaven in possessing her, instead of caring only for a woman who has no more passion or pity than those Mexican aloes?'

As he walked home the remembrance of Nadine Napraxine seemed like a little adder growing in his heart, and the large eyes of Yseulte de Valogne seemed to look into his soul with their golden sun-rays. He was passionately in love with the one, bitterly, angrily, resentfully, in love; for the other he felt an extreme pity, a sympathy, which with propitious circumstances might become affection, an admiration of the senses which might with time be

heightened to desire, an inclination to take her in his arms and save her from her fate as he might have taken up a wounded bird to save it from the trap.

CHAPTER XII.

YSEULTE the next day was sitting writing a German theme in the children's room, of which the windows opened on the gardens, when Alain de Vannes, with a cigarette in his mouth, pushed open the glass door and sauntered in from the open air.

'Well, my cousin,' he said gaily. 'Here you are, shut up like a little mouse. What nonsense it is! German? What good will that do you? When the *revanche* comes, we shall speak with bullets and they will understand as we understood. Pardieu! When they burnt my woods in Charente!—I had a ball in my ribs at Saarbrück; did you know it? Where were you? In Paris?—during the siege? A baby like you! Is it possible!'

'There were many other little children there,' said the girl with a shudder; she had been such a little child then, that the horror of the time had left an ineffaceable mark upon her.

'Of course, of course,' said the Duc, seating himself on the edge of the table. 'But not many of your rank. Most people got away. Ah, to be sure, I remember your uncles de Creusac were both shot; yes, we all lost heavily; it is no use thinking of it; but I would give my life to enter Berlin. *Tiens!* this is not what I came to say, but you make one serious; why will you not laugh? Do you know that we have a ball next week?'

'I heard Blanchette saying so.'

'Ah, the little cat! She knows everything. Now, this ball —would you not like to come to it, instead of being shut up in your room writing crabbed German characters?'

'It is impossible.'

While she said the cruel word firmly, her heart gave a great leap of longing that was almost hope.

'Not impossible; perhaps difficult,' said de Vannes, with a smile, as he threw his cigar out on to the grass. 'But I think I could persuade Cri-Cri; it is a shame for you to be shut up; you will have enough of that all your life if you go where they say.'

Yseulte was silent; her heart was still beating tumultuously, she breathed quickly.

'How handsome she is!' thought the Duc. 'She only wants that flush of life to be perfect. Women are like alabaster lamps, unlit until they learn envy and desire. When that flame is lighted, then the alabaster glows.'

He stooped his head and kissed her hand, but he did it with a

different touch to Othmar's, and she coloured with a sense of pain and anger.

'*Ma mie*!' he murmured. 'I will undertake to combat successfully the scruples of your cousin; you shall see the ball next week. Cri-Cri shall find you a frock, and jewels you want none; you have the supreme jewel—youth; crowns are dull without it; and, let our dear women use what arts they may, they cannot counterfeit it. I will be your good genius, Yseulte, and open your prison doors. You will not refuse me a little gratitude—a little goodwill? Something quite simple and commonplace will content me, you see, but you must give it *de bon cœur*.'

The words were harmless, and said little, but his eyes as they were bent upon her said much; much more than he knew. There was a look in them which lighted their pale blue with a fire from which she shrank by instinct, as from something which scorched and hurt her. The eyes of Alain de Vannes, like those of most men who have lived his life and had his experiences, were cold, jaded, passionless in repose, but when amorous, were cruel, eager, rapacious. Yseulte drew her hand from him; her heart sank five fathoms deep, but she gathered up all her courage.

'You are very good, *M. mon cousin*,' she said with a ceremonious coldness worthy of one twice her years. 'But do not trouble yourself for me. That sort of pleasure would not accord with the life that I am always to lead. I do not know the world; I do not wish to know it; it is never to have anything to do with me; it is better I should not even see it, I might only regret.'

She said the little speech bravely, not faltering once, though to make it cost her a pang, but she crushed out all her natural longings, all her wistful instincts, all her youthful dreams to do so; flowers plucked up by the roots and thrown down at the foot of the altars of Marie. But even at this moment the altar still seemed to her that which she had been always told that it was, a refuge sweet, safe, unfailing. A refuge from what? She did not know, but a vague fear had assailed her.

De Vannes looked at her with surprise and irritation; at the bottom of his heart he was himself ashamed of the unholy wishes which had awakened in him, of the treacherous temptations which he had begun to put in the path of a girl who was his own guest, his wife's relative, and whose position ought in its sheer defencelessness to have been her best safeguard with any man of honour. He was not without honour, in a loose fashion, but he was very unscrupulous when his fancy was excited. If before her retirement to the religious life she should have an 'affaire,' and if that 'affaire' should have himself for its hero, it did not seem to him that anything terrible would have taken place. What was the use of occupying a high position if one could not successfully conduct and cover a little intrigue like that?

At the same time he knew that his designs would scarcely be

condoned, even by the very light-minded set amongst which he lived, if it were seriously known that he had endeavoured to be the first to corrupt his young cousin. Therefore her words struck a certain nerve of susceptibility within him; he felt a kind of compunction before that serious and guileless regard. Yet he was very angry. He, Alain de Vannes, who never looked at a *fillette*, who never deigned to notice any lesser thing than some of the famous beauties of the great world, or of the half-world, had taken the infinite trouble to distinguish this child, to seek her and to offer her his influence and protection, and she had repulsed him, with her hands lying crossed on her German books and her rose-leaf cheeks growing neither the warmer nor the colder for his regard.

He rose, and his eyebrows contracted in a heavy frown. He was a good-humoured man usually, but in such rare times as his will was crossed he had the petulance and the malice of a spoiled child.

'You are not wise, *fillette*,' he said, with a little laugh. 'I would be a good friend to you, and you may want one before you are safe in the bosom of Our Lady. I wonder the ball did not tempt you. You would have seen your friend Othmar—and Madame Napraxine.'

Then he pulled the glass door open with an impatient hand, and went out into the grounds without, leaving behind him the odour of his cigarette and the sting of his last words.

Blanchette peeped in from behind a silk curtain; her saucy babyish eyes were full of curiosity and wonder.

'*Tiens*, Yseulte,' she said, running up to her cousin, 'I heard all papa said. Why should he want you at the ball, and why should you not go? You are a goose, such a goose! You know papa can always make mamma do what he chooses. He always threatens to send away M. de Prangins.'

Then Blanchette laughed, curling up in a little ball at her cousin's feet.

'You should not say such wicked things, Blanchette,' said Yseulte; 'and it is very shameful and dishonourable to listen anywhere unseen——'

Blanchette made a *pied de nez* with her little rosy fingers, with all the mockery and insolence of Gavrôche himself.

'You are vulgar as well as wicked,' said her cousin sadly, as she looked away.

'It is distinguished to be vulgar, now,' said the little ten-year-old Parisienne. 'All the great ladies are, except Madame Napraxine; she is always wrapped up in herself. She has no *entrain*, she cares for nothing. She is not at all my model. Listen! If you were not such an idiot, you would see that *petit papa* is in love with you, ever so much in love! Why don't you get all kinds of things out of him while he is in the humour?

He would buy you all the Palais Royal if you knew how to manage him, and mamma will not say anything as long as the Marquis Raymond is here.'

'Blanchette!' cried the girl, indignantly. She rose to her feet; a flood of shame seemed to roll over her.

The insolent, malicious turquoise eyes of Blanchette amused themselves with her horror and trouble.

'You are such a baby!' said the child again, contemptuously. 'You never seem to understand anything. Me, I understand it all. I shall *do* it all when I am married. I shall be just like mamma. It is the Marquis Raymond now; it was the Prince Jacques last year. I liked the Prince Jacques best. He gave me an orchestra of monkeys; you wound it up and all the monkeys played—fife, drum, clarionet, flute, too-too, too-too, tra-la-la-la! The marquis has never given me anything, except a sack of bonbons he might have bought at St. Cloud. If he do not give me something very good at new year, I shall say out loud in the salon, when a lot of people are making visits: "You are not as nice as Prince Jacques!" And how he will look, because he always frets and fumes about the prince! I think they fought about mamma. Oh, it must be such fun to be a woman! I wish, I wish, I wish I were fifteen. I would be so naughty, they would have to marry me to-morrow! If you were not a goose you would be as naughty as ever you could be. They would get you a husband then; papa would see to it.'

'Blanchette!' cried Yseulte, again, in desperation, not knowing how to stem the tide of the child's words. She, like Blanchette herself, was ignorant of all the horrible import of those words which the little thing used, half in malicious precocious knowledge, and half in absolute childish ignorance; but they terrified her and appalled her both in themselves and for their speaker, and for all which, even to her innocence, they suggested of unspeakable inconceivable shamefulness.

'Blanchette!' echoed the child, mimicking the horror and expostulation of her cry. 'Oh, how glad I am I have Schemmitz and Brawn to teach me instead of going to a convent to be made a goose of like you. Schemmitz and Brawn are old owls, but I keep my eyes and my ears open at Trouville, at Biarritz, in Paris, here, anywhere, everywhere. Now, in your nunnery you see no more, you hear no more, than if you were a statue in a chapel. That is why you are so stupid. *Tiens*! Why did papa call Count Othmar your friend? Is he your friend? You are as still as a mouse about everything.'

Her quick glance saw the colour mount into her cousin's face, and the cruel child laughed triumphantly. 'Oh, how you blush, oh-oh! Nobody blushes nowadays. One must be old-fashioned like you to be so silly. *I* shall never blush. *Tiens*, Yseulte! tell me all about it and I will not tell Toinon.'

'There is nothing to tell,' said Yseulte, almost losing her patience.

'Papa never says anything without meaning something by it,' said Blanchette, sagaciously. 'And if there be nothing, why should you blush? I know all about Count Othmar; he is rich—oh, so rich! Nobody was ever so rich outside the *Juiverie*; I heard them say so this autumn at Aix. But all he cares about is Princess Napraxine. Have you ever seen Princess Napraxine? She drives in the Bois with three horses in the Russian way; the one in the middle is a little in front of the others, and they have only little bits of silver for harness, and they fly—ouf! I mean to marry a Russian.'

'Is she so very beautiful?' said Yseulte, in a low tone, ashamed of questioning the child, and yet impelled by an irresistible desire to hear more of this wondrous sovereign.

'*Pas tant que ça!*' said Blanchette, critically. 'But she is much more than only handsome. She makes everyone that goes near her mad about her. She is pale, and has great eyes; but there is no one like her, they say. What do you think they call her? They call her Flocon de Neige. She cares for nobody, you know; that is what they mean. She is not at all what I admire; what I admire is the Duchesse d'Ambrée. *Elle sait se faire une tête!*' continued Blanchette, growing breathless, and powerless to express her immense admiration.

Madame d'Ambrée was a blonde, with a profusion of real gold curls, cheeks admirably tinted, and a tiny Cupid's bow of a mouth; a great huntress, a great swimmer, a great smoker; she had very extravagant toilettes, and very loud manners, and was a really great lady, with the language of a cantinière: she was the object of the child's idolatry.

'I will be just like that,' Blanchette said to herself whenever she saw Madame d'Ambrée walking on the planks at Trouville, going into the casino at Aix, or driving her piebald ponies round the Bois. Blanchette admired her own mother immensely, but she admired the Duchesse d'Ambrée still more.

'*Maman baisse un peu,*' she often said to her sister, with a little scornful smile. She knew that her mother was twenty-eight; to Blanchette that age seemed to be quite hopeless decrepitude.

'Yseulte,' she said, suddenly now, 'if you do not give me your silver prayer-book, I shall tell mamma about you and papa. *Dis donc, sois sage.* Give me the silver Hours.'

The silver prayer-book had belonged to a Marquise de Creusac, in the time of Louis Treize. It was adorned with illuminated letters, and the coronet and initials were set in opals on one side of the silver cover. Yseulte had been given the book by her grandmother on her death-bed; she used it always, and it was the object of Blanchette's desires.

'You know that I cannot give it you,' said Yseulte, gently. 'It was my grandmother's last gift; it is an heirloom.'

Blanchette looked up from under her yellow hair.

'You had better give it me. *Sois sage!*'

She had the same expression—half menace, half malice—that her father had had.

'I cannot,' repeated her cousin, 'I have told you so, dear, a hundred times. I should not have a moment's peace if I parted with that book.'

Blanchette said nothing more, but she made a wheel of herself on the school-room floor, as she had seen the boys do on the pavement in Paris. 'Comme on est bête! Comme on est bête!' she kept thinking in her shrewd little mind, as she stood on her wise little skull with all the dexterity of any street-boy.

Blanchette at ten years old had already resolved the problem of life with great simplicity; its solution seemed to her to consist in getting whatever you wanted by being detestable whenever you did not get it.

On the night of the ball, when the first carriages rolled up to the *perron* of Millo, Yseulte, who had gone to bed at ten o'clock, but had not slept, rose and went to her window, which looked on the front of the house. The illuminations of the building and of the grounds were so brilliant that the light was almost as strong as day. The awnings hid from her sight the steps at which the arriving guests descended, but she could see the carriages as they came up towards them, and she could hear the Suisse bawl out the names of those who arrived one after another; amongst them some of the greatest names of Europe. At twelve she heard the name of Othmar; but she had not seen him; for the blinds of his brougham were down.

An hour and a half later, almost the last of the apparently endless succession of champing horses and lamp-lit coupés, she saw one carriage of which the window next her was lowered as it drove up; she could see within it a very lovely woman, with a little tiara of diamonds on her head, and a great bouquet, made entirely of gardenias, in her hand, and a cloak of gold tissue, lined with ermine, drawn up as high as her mouth. The lady's profile, delicate as if it were cut in ivory, with something satirical and mutinous in its expression, was all that Yseulte could see of her; but she felt that in that moment she had looked on the Princess Napraxine. In effect, as the carriage rolled beneath the awning, the sonorous Muscovite name was shouted by the waiting lackeys.

The girl withdrew from the casement and shut the shutters; she did not want to see any more.

She lay down again, but she did not sleep. The sound of dance music, played by the band of the ball-room, echoed through all the villa, which was a light modern structure, and had little

solidity in it. She did not care for the dancing; she hardly knew what it was like; but she thought of the lovely woman with the pretty contemptuous profile, and the diamonds and the gardenias in her hair. She could not sleep for thinking of her; she was there below in the light, amidst the music and the flowers, and Othmar was there too. The visitants which Alain de Vannes had wished should go to her, envy and regret, entered her innocent soul, and made sad ravages there, as when a rat runs amidst a white rose and pulls its blossoms down.

Sleep kept aloof from her; she was ashamed of her own thoughts, but the dawn found her with hot wide-open eyes. The music was still sounding, like a tireless, immortal thing that shouted and laughed for its pleasure. It was only the first notes of the cotillon; but to Yseulte it sounded like the song of triumph of the world—that world which she would never know.

All her nuns and priests could not perhaps have read her a sounder homily than the house mutely spoke when she went timidly downstairs and through its many rooms at sunrise.

The flowers covering the balustrades and walls of the staircase were dying; the sleepy servants were turning out the gas, putting out the wax candles; other servants were drinking champagne and smoking cigars as they hurried to clear away the supper tables; in the ball-room there was a litter of dropped flowers, torn lace, discarded cotillon toys, atoms of fringe and of ribbon which looked scarcely better than rags; the torches were still flaming amongst the scorched clusters of azaleas and roses; in the vestibule two gentlemen who had stayed to drink some black coffee were putting on their furs and yawning miserably; Alain de Vannes, as he sauntered upstairs, was muttering, 'C'est crevant!—un bal chez soi:—on ne me reprendra jamais!' and a maid of his wife's was recounting her griefs to a tall powdered lackey, with sobs of rage: 'Madame m'a donné des gifles, mais des gifles!—enfin—elle tomba de sommeil, et puis le petit Prangins n'a pas été gentil pour elle du tout, du tout, ce soir-là!'

CHAPTER XIII.

NADINE NAPRAXINE meanwhile rolled home in the pale light of the winter morning, which had dawned over a quiet sea and a peaceful country. She was neither fatigued nor exhilarated by a ball which had been one of those long triumphs to which she was so well used. She looked as calm, as cool, as delicate of hue, as any Lenten lily that opens between the snow and the moss on an April morning. She was one of those women who can go through incredible fatigue, whether of pleasure or of travel, without any personal traces of it.

Whilst her companion, Lady Brancepeth, nodded and slumbered, she looked out at the landscape over which the sun was slowly dawning, driving before its rays the white mists which stretched over sea and mountain. There were people moving in it: women came down the steep stone ladders of their fields bearing heavy loads of oranges or of vegetables; mule carts plodded along the cactus-lined paths; fishermen were pushing boats into deep water; church bells were ringing. She, with her delicate and keen perception of what was beautiful, found pleasure in watching the simple hardy figures which were seen for a moment and then disappeared beneath the mist, in hearing the bells answer one another ringing across the white clouds that were touching the earth.

'What does it feel like,' she wondered, 'to sleep sound all night on a bit of sacking, and get up in the dusk, and go into the wet fields and labour? What do these people think about? What do sheep think about, or oxen? It must be much the same thing. Wilkes, what do field-labourers think about?—you have got ever so many at home, you ought to know.'

Lady Brancepeth felt cross at being aroused and cross at having been asleep:

'Think about?' she murmured; 'oh, I don't know; beer, I believe with us, beer and bacon; here I should say francs, nothing but francs, probably. What put them in your head? And there are no labourers here in our sense of the word, you know; it is most of it *la petite culture*, you know. I never believe it is good for the soil, certainly not in the long run; it can't be; they get everything out, they put nothing in. Of course they think only of the market of the day; they don't think of the future, those people. That will be always the upshot of peasant proprietors, they will always ruin the soil.'

Nadine Napraxine laughed:

'What a fine thing it is to be an Englishwoman; you think of political economy and of "the soil" the very moment that you wake out of a doze! I suppose the earth will certainly last our time; what does the rest matter?'

'You are so—so—so egotistic and autocratic, Nadine.'

The Princess laughed.

'Oh, I don't know; I don't think so. I like a despotism, I was born under it; it saves so much trouble, and one big despot is very much easier to deal with than a score of little ones, especially when you stand well at his Court. It is always better to be judged by a judge instead of a jury, but simpletons will not see that.'

'But how can one judge, however just, rightfully judge a nation of millions unless he have the eyes and ears of Vishnou? I think you really are a despot by nature, but you are so very disputatious that you are always ready to repudiate your most

cherished opinions for sheer sake of argument. You should have been a sophist.'

'Every question is polygonal. Look at that gleam of light on that sail, and all the rest of the vessel lost in fog—how charming! —it is like a picture of Alvanoffsky's. That is what I like in life; nothing said out, nothing broadly and rudely done, everything *à demi mot*, everything suggestion, not assertion; that is the only way to exhaust nothing, not to be wearied.'

'You like impressions, not pictures; that is the new school. Everyone is not satisfied with it. That there are people to whom these vague wavy lines, those dim washes of colour, tell little——'

'Oh, the people to whom one must explain! Let them all go where the sheep of Panurge went.'

'I wish you would condescend for once to explain something,' said Lady Brancepeth, and paused: Princess Nadine heard with a look of infinite *ennui*.

'You mean to revenge yourself for having been awakened out of that doze. I never explain—*enfin*!——tell me what you want.'

Under this slight encouragement Lady Brancepeth gained courage to plunge straightforward into a question which she had long meditated.

'Will you tell me, my dear Nadine, what you mean to do with my brother?'

Madame Napraxine turned a little round in her ermine and gold brocade, and looked solemnly in her companion's face.

'My dear Evelyn, you amaze me! Do with him? I? With your brother?—with Lord Geraldine? What should I do with him? Do you want me to make a good marriage for him? But you are there to preside over that; and, besides, he will make one himself—some day.'

'Speak seriously for a moment,' said Lady Brancepeth with impatience. 'You are very clever, and are fond of *demi-mots*; I am a blunt, stupid woman, and so I like plain ones. It is two years since Geraldine has had any other thought than yourself. When will you be merciful and unmagnetise him?'

'Does that depend on me?' said the Princess Nadine, with a little laugh. 'Do you want me to make a few passes in the air with my hand? I can do it if you wish, but I doubt the result.'

Lady Brancepeth made an impatient movement.

'Poor Ralph is only one amongst many, I know, my dear; but for that very reason surely you might spare him? You do not care the least little atom about him——'

'The least little! I am a Russian, but I do know that is not good English. I speak better English than you do.'

'You do everything admirably well. You are the most intelligent as you are the most interesting woman that I know; but you are also the most heartless,' answered Lady Brancepeth

with some heat. 'I am not a prude; I can understand temptation and the weakness that cedes to it; I can understand love and the force that it may exercise, and I can forgive even its follies; but your kind of coquetry I cannot forgive. It is the exercise of a merciless power which is as chill as a vivisector's attitude before his victim. You have no sympathy or compassion; you have only a sort of cynical amusement in what you do; you make yourself the centre of a man's life with no more effort than you use that fan; the man is nothing to you, nothing on earth; but you destroy all his peace, all his future——'

'Dear Wilkes, do not be so tragic!' murmured Princess Napraxine, with a little yawn. 'I dislike tragedy; I never by any chance go to Perrin's when they play one. If men are fond of me—as you say——'

'As I say!' ejaculated Lady Brancepeth.

'As you say; it is merely because—as you wisely if ungrammatically observed—it is because I do not care the "least little atom" about any one of them. I should have exceedingly liked to care for Platon; it would have been something new; it would have agreed with my programme of life; it would have suited me in every way; but *n'aime pas qui veut*; who *could* care for Platon? Does anybody ever care for a good-natured, very big, and entirely uninteresting person who drinks brandy and grows bald?'

'You beg my question,' retorted Lady Brancepeth; 'you know very well that I am not talking of your husband.'

'Then you ought to be if you be not! You are a very immoral woman to recommend me to care for anybody else,' said the Princess with her soft, quiet little laugh, that was as pretty as the coo of a wood-dove but by no means so harmless.

'You would exasperate a saint,' cried her companion.

'I never met one,' said Nadine. 'The nearest approach to one that I know is Melville, and I can put *him* out of temper.'

'I have no doubt you can,' said Lady Brancepeth; 'I think you would anyone; you do such immeasurable harm, and are all the while as demure as a rabbit, and as innocent-looking. My dear Princess, you are the cruellest woman that lives! Flocon de Neige they call you. They might much more appropriately call you Goutte de Morphine. You enervate, and you kill, and all the while, what do you care? You care no more than the morphia does.'

'Did the ball bore you too so dreadfully that you are so very unkind? A rabbit and morphia! Your similes are mixed, my dear. I am never a flirt; a flirt is a very vulgar thing. No man lives, I can assure you, who could say he ever had a word of encouragement from me. That is not at all my way.'

'No!' said Lady Brancepeth, bitterly, 'your way is merely to look at men and destroy them, and then laugh a little when they are spoken of; I never reproached you with ordinary coquetry; I

reproach you with something much more subtle, arrogant, cold, and cruel. There is a gum of the East advertised which does not kill flies, only attracts them, so that they cling to it by millions, and hang there stupidly in a throng till they die. That gum is very like your power over your lovers; it is just as passive, just as deadly.'

'The gum and I were made as we are by nature. Blame nature. The men and the flies would do worse if they did not do that. And pray do not talk about my lovers; I have none.'

'You have no serfs in Russia, but you have moujiks; and it is still much the same thing, as far as their submission goes.'

'You are really too sarcastic, Wilkes. Was Cri-Cri's champagne bad? Surely not. But there must be something you have not digested. Perhaps it is the caviare sandwiches. Here we are, at home. Do go to bed and dream of your gum, your rabbit, and your bottle of morphine. None of these things can swim, but I, who am a combination of them, can; and I shall be swimming under your window whilst you sleep.'

The carriage stopped at the foot of the terrace of La Jacquemerille, and she descended, aided by Geraldine, who, with her husband, had arrived a few minutes earlier.

Lady Brancepeth hurried indoors, conscious, with the consciousness of thirty-five years, that the morning light was not becoming after a ball. Nadine Napraxine, with the equally conscious immunity of an exquisite complexion, and of that kind of beauty which is like a sea-shell, unwound the lace from about her delicate head, and paused in the doorway, looking seaward.

'I shall not go to bed,' she said, as the rays of the sunrise touched the gilded pinnacles and vanes of La Jacquemerille. 'I shall go and get into a peignoir, then breakfast, and then bathe. It is so stupid to go to bed when the sun is up. Platon, you look like a bear awaked before he has done hybernating. Did you not get sleep enough in de Vannes' *fumoir*?'

'I never get sleep enough,' replied Napraxine, good-humouredly but drowsily; 'and you do a very foolish thing if you stand there, Princess, in a frost, at seven o'clock, after five hours of the cotillon!'

'There is no frost; look at the geraniums; and I never take cold; that is not my malady at all; I am not so silly.'

Napraxine opened his sleepy eyes.

'When you cannot live in Russia because the tubercles on your lungs——'

'Dr. Thiviers is responsible for the tubercles. One is obliged to say something civil to get away from a Court. It is always safe to say one suffers with one's lungs; nobody can ask to look at them. Pray go to bed, and dream of Nirvana, if you know what it means.'

The Prince obeyed, and disappeared yawning. Geraldine

remained, gazing at this elegant figure on the marble step, with its *sortie du bal* of ermine and gold silk folded about it, and the face with its hue of a white tea-rose, which could defy so surely the searching morning light.

She glanced at him in return, and laughed. 'How droll you look with your *claque* and your ulster; you are not harmonious with the landscape, my friend; and you look sulky. The ball seems to have disagreed with all of you; yet it was a very good ball, as balls go; it is impossible to give any variety to a ball. Balls and funerals, *ça se ressemble trop.*'

She drew the ermine over her pretty chin, the diamonds sparkled in her hair; the bouquet of gardenias swung in her hand. The eyes of Geraldine grew very sombre and covetous.

'I am sorry I am a blot on the scene,' he said, moodily. 'Englishmen are always unpicturesque. I stood still and gazed at you all night, but no doubt I only looked like a policeman or a fool———'

'Or both,' she murmured, with a smile.

He continued unheedingly, 'While your friend Othmar, who did precisely the same thing, looked, of course, to you and to everybody, like a Titian resuscitated.'

'Othmar is not especially like any Titian that I have ever seen,' said Madame Napraxine, 'but he knows how to stand with grace, which no Englishman ever did know yet. You are quite right; your people do not "compose" well, except when they are in the hunting-field, or playing some very rough game; but you need not *souffler* for compliments; you are very good-looking—in your way.'

'Thanks,' muttered Geraldine, in a tone which would have better suited an imprecation.

Othmar had not danced once with her; he had indeed only moved reluctantly through a *contre-danse* with his hostess; but the unerring instinct of jealousy made the envy of Geraldine fasten on him rather than on any other of the crowd for whom the ball at Millo had only meant Princess Napraxine.

'It is a little chilly,' said the Princess as she turned from the open door.

Geraldine caught her hand which held the fan: 'If you would but believe all that your life is to us, you would not run such mad risks as this raw cold fog after a ball! Had I been Platon, I would have carried you to your room by main force.'

The face of Nadine Napraxine grew very cold.

'You are not Prince Napraxine—happily for myself and yourself; and I do not like impertinences. Go and smoke, and recover your good manners.'

'You were kinder to me before Othmar came home!' said Geraldine, with injudicious reproach.

'You have *very* bad manners,' said the Princess calmly, as she

gathered up her ermine and drew her flower-laden train over the little hall and up the staircase.

She smiled as she passed upward.

'How babyish they all are!' she reflected. 'As if to complain of another man were not the very way to cement a woman's preference for him—if she had any preference. That poor boy has no tact; if his sister had not said anything about him I would send him away; he is a bore. To be sure, he is here to take Platon off one's hands, and smoke with him. All men are tiresome when you have known them a month or so; all human beings are tiresome. Nobody ever tires of me, and I tire of everybody. Perhaps——'

She remembered that Othmar had alone never tired her; he had been too romantic, too presuming, too prone to fancy he had rights and wrongs; but he had never wearied her. Most men were so absurd when they were enamoured of her, but he was not so; a little too, like Ruy Blas perhaps a little too inclined to be serious and impassioned, to the *vieux jeu* in a word; but still he had kept his grace and kept his dignity. He kept them still; he would not let her play with him. She was the one woman on earth for him; but he did not become her slave.

She had her bath and wrapped herself in a loose gown of satin and lace and went out into the garden with a rose-coloured hood over her head. It was certainly cold, and the mists had not altogether cleared; bnt it was a point of honour with her to do what her physician and her friends denounced as most dangerous.

'Platon is snoring,' she thought contemptuously, as she glanced over the closed shutters. 'And I dare say Geraldine snores too, if one only knew. I dare say they both took soda and brandy. Men are certainly unlovely creatures. As long as we are young we are a little better than they; we look pretty asleep, and we don't snore. How *maquillée* poor Cri-Cri was last night, and then she really throws her heart into the affair with de Prangins; nothing ever ages a woman like that; and I am quite sure he does not care a straw about her.'

She walked up and down her terrace, trailing her rose-coloured skirts over the marble; she was a little sleepy, a little bored; but she wished to show to her friends that she could dance all night and breakfast out of doors without more fatigue than a nightingale, after singing all night, feels as he trips across the grass at sunrise.

She thought, with a little amusement, that, if Geraldine were really as wasting with despair as he professed to be, he would have been out of bed still on the mere chance of her reappearance. The various degrees of passions in her lovers diverted her; she had no vanity; she could dissect and weigh their emotions with perfect accuracy and philosophise upon them with a clearness of understanding wholly beyond the reach of vain woman. Analysis diverted her much more than conquest. Some had loved her

tragically, some had died through her if not for her; she had had genuine triumphs, great enough and costly enough to satisfy the pride of anyone; therefore she could amuse herself very well with the contradiction when somebody, who declared that he only lived for her, nevertheless drank his claret with relish; or somebody else, who was for ever at her feet, nevertheless ceased not to be critical of his cigars.

'Poor Othmar!' she thought now; 'he would stay sleepless in the street all night on the chance of seeing my shadow on a window blind!'

That was the *vieux jeu*; romanticism which did not suit their world; which even made her impatient of it as indifferent people are always impatient of earnestness. But it was fine after all: finer than Geraldine's sulkiness which let him go to sleep.

The air was very cold, but the morning was fair, and the mists were lifting higher and higher every moment; as her skirts brushed the bay hedge it gave forth a sweet odour, snowdrops and hepatica blossomed under the big aloes, and ground ivy was green about the stems of the palms; the mountains grew the hue of summer roses under the sun's approach, then paled into amethyst and pearly grey; it was intensely quiet, there was no sound but of some unseen gardener sweeping up dead leaves; the yellow wings of an oriole flashed among the glossy leaves of a pitosperum.

'The world looks as if God washed it clean every morning,' she thought. 'It gets soiled before noon. Decidedly it is only the birds who are innocent enough for the sunrise.'

The latent sadness of the Russian character was in her, beneath her *insouciance* and her pessimism and her irony: sometimes she wished she had not been born to that world in which she lived, where there is no pause for reflection, but only a continuous succession of spectacles, excitations, revelries, where no one is ever alone, where no one has ever time to note a wild flower grow or a sun sink to the west, where the babble of society is for ever on the ear, and Nature has no place at all except as a *décor de théâtre* of which no one thinks more than the actor thinks of the painted canvas behind him with its bridge or its garden or its windmill.

'I do believe I should have liked to have been a poor woman and have married such a man as Millet or Corot,' she thought to herself now as she walked along the alley of bay that ran parallel with the sea. Then she laughed at the idea of herself, living in a cottage in a French wood, without any lace, without any diamonds, without any toilettes, looking for a dusty footsore artist coming home through the trees to his *pot au feu*. Somehow the artist in her fancy had the features of Othmar—of Othmar, who was a prince of the Bourses and could no more escape the world than she could!

It scarcely surprised her when she saw him in person, as

though her thoughts had compelled him to come thither. He was alone, in a little boat, which drifted slowly past the sea-terrace of La Jacquemerille; his hands rested idly on the oars, and his eyes were looking upward at the house.

She leaned down through one of the openings of the wall of clipt bay, and thrust her rose satin hood over the water.

'Is it you, Othmar?' she said to him. 'What are you doing on the sea at eight o'clock? How astonished you look! Do you wonder what I am doing in the open air? They are all asleep comfortably, though they think I am courting death. Row to the stairs; you can breakfast with me.'

He hesitated, looking up at her with his head uncovered and his eyes dazzled by the delicate face that was peering forth from the framework of close-sheared bay boughs.

'Come!' said Madame Napraxine. Her voice could be very imperious, and was so now.

He obeyed in silence, passed to the landing-place a hundred yards farther down, and in five minutes' time approached her under the arched roof of the bay charmille.

'But you were only back from the ball an hour or less!' he said, as he bowed before her.

'I was not inclined to go to bed; the morning is fine. You are up betimes, too. When did you leave Millo?'

'I left when you did,' said Othmar, with significance in the brevity of the reply.

'Then you cannot have breakfasted either. You will breakfast with me; I was just going back to the house.'

It was precisely the sort of *coup de scène* which would amuse her; her husband and Geraldine lounging downstairs, late, cross, and easily ruffled, to find her alone with their neighbour from S. Pharamond. It was one of those amusing little incidents which Providence, who, she was sure, was kind to her, was always sending her to relieve the monotony of human life.

'What were you doing under the sea wall?' she pursued. 'Is it your habit, too, never to go to bed? You must have been rowing some time. We are two sea leagues at least from your place. What did you think of Cri-Cri's ball? That new figure with the coloured hoops was pretty; but the Duc leads a cotillon better than anyone.'

'Admirable pre-eminence!' said Othmar. 'I saw you with the coloured hoops. You made them look as if Ariel had just brought them from Titania. But I do not think the charm was in the hoops themselves.'

'If you had cared to lead a cotillon, Othmar, you might have been a happier man.'

'That I do not doubt; the frivolous faculty is a very happy one.'

'At all events, though you despise it, you are indulgent to it.

You gave us superb presents at your own fête. Come in to breakfast. I would not admit it if Platon were here, but it *is* cold.'

'And surely it is not very wise to be in the cold after a ball?'

'That is what they all said, so I came. I have not much sympathy with children, but I do understand why they like to do a thing for no other reason than that they are told not to do it. My physicians pretend that morning air is as bad as damp shoes, but I believe they say that to be agreeable to their patients who turn night into day. It is not only Molière's doctors who are charlatans. I imagine it is the perpetual affectation of sympathy which doctors are compelled to put on which makes them hypocrites. Come into the house.'

He went on in silence beside her along the bay path. He could not easily talk of trifles with her; she had filled all his life for two whole years; he loved her as he had loved no other woman. When he had returned home from the Millo ball, he had bathed and swam in the little bay of S. Pharamond, and then had rowed himself along the coast in that vague irresistible desire to pass near where she dwelt which every true lover feels.

He had resolved to emancipate himself from her power; as he had watched her through the night he had told himself that to care for her was to waste life on a baseless and ungrateful dream. Yet, when she had looked down from her evergreen rampart, and had said 'Come!' he had been unable to resist.

As he paced beside her now, the delicate perfume of her laces, the floating, indefinite lines of the rose-satin draperies, the glimpse of her profile which the hood showed, her slender feet in their rose-coloured pearl-sewn slippers, which stepped so lightly over the shining shingle of the paths—one and all they conquered his calmness and his resolves, as the fumes of new wine mount over the brain and move the senses. She walked on, provocative as Venus, unattainable as Una, speaking idly of this thing and of that, knowing very well what made his answers all at random and his colour changeful. Other women might need to use all the arts of conquest; might need to woo with their eyes, to charm with their smiles, to solicit with their glances. She had no such vulgar fashions; she moved, spoke, looked, as the moment actuated her, and noticed her lovers hardly more than she noticed the little dog that ran after her skirts. To exist and to be seen was enough to secure her more victories than she chose to count.

If she noticed Othmar more than others it was because he had gone away from her, he had rebuked her, he had appeared to defy her, and he had dared to tell her he loved her with more reproach and more bitterness of soul than any other had ever done. She did not intend to accept his life, or to give him hers; but she did not intend that his should be unable to detach itself. And all the while she talked to him with that easy, even kindness, as of a friend, with those light philosophies of a woman of the

world, which were to the passions of a man as ether spray thrown upon a lava-flood; and she took him into breakfast with her as though he were her brother.

She occasionally drank her chocolate in a boudoir opening on to the terrace: a little nest of white satin and looking-glass and Saxe china; the ceiling was a mirror painted with little doves and flowers; the carpet was of lambskins; the corners were filled with azaleas, rose and white, like her gown. She looked only a larger flower as she sank down on one of the couches. The chocolate was served on Moorish trays, in Turkish cups, by a little negro who, gorgeous in his dress and immovable as a statue, was often taken by new comers for an enamelled bronze cast by Barbédienne, so motionless did he squat before the door of any room she occupied. Othmar almost envied that little African menial the right he had to see his mistress pass and repass a hundred times a day. Nadine, in her nonchalant way, was kind to the boy.

'He will die of pneumonia—they always do,' she said now. 'Poor dusky little beetles, they only live by their hot sand and their hot sun; to be sure, our houses inside are as hot as Africa, but outside, the east wind blows, and one day it will blow too much for Mahmoud. I suppose it would be a terrible thing for civilisation if the East ever again surged over the West; but the East has very much to avenge, and I am not sure that civilisation would be any great loss. It has discovered that man is only a sort of hotbed for bacteria, and that butter can be made out of river mud, and coffee out of powdered tan.'

She had taken the hood off her head; she was as charming as a child freshly out of a bath, with her eyes brilliant and her cheeks a little warmed by the transition from the chill air of early morning to the room heated to 30° Réaumur. She had tossed herself backwards amongst the white satin cushions. Her eyes, which were like onyx, dwelt on him with a gleam of amusement; her beautiful mouth had the smile which was so enigmatical, so gay, and yet so cold. She had had a different smile when she had said to little Mahmoud, 'Cover yourself warmly here; though the sun shines, it is not African.'

'What has that black brat done that you are so merciful to him?' asked Othmar.

She replied: 'That black brat is a victim of civilisation. I hate civilisation, as you know. It even adulterates truffles.'

'Did you ever smile so kindly on your own children?'

'I cannot say. I do not count my smiles. That poor little slave is interesting, he is an exile, and he will die in a year or two; my children are insufferably uninteresting; they have unchangeable health, intense stupidity, and will grow up to have every desire fulfilled, every caprice gratified, and to become that irresponsible, useless, tyrannical anachronism—a Russian noble.

Perhaps they will be good soldiers and kill a score of Asiatics. Perhaps they will only drink brandy, and gamble.'

Othmar did not reply; he was looking at the exquisite grace of her form, the tea-rose tint of her cheeks. Was it possible that she could be the mother of two stout, ugly, Tartar-faced boys? It seemed to him a profanation; a hideous incongruity. He did not like to think of it. If she had had a child at all it should have been some blossom-like creature, sharing her own grace as the catkin shares the willow's. The subtlest charm about her was that ethereality, as of a virginal goddess, which was blent in her with all the *finesses* of seduction and of mind. The boldest man felt that in Nadine Napraxine the senses had hardly more empire than in the ivory Venus of the Greeks.

The eyes of Othmar dwelt on her now yearningly, sombrely, wistfully.

'It is of no use,' he said, abruptly. 'I did wrong to come here. If you wish for men who can, whilst they adore you, sit and drink chocolate and talk epigrams, seek elsewhere; I am not one of them. I can wear a mask, but it must be of iron, not of velvet.'

'The iron mask was of velvet,' said she, correcting him, unmoved by the repressed passion in his voice. 'All our illusions vanish under the electric light of history, and the iron mask is one of them. I daily expect to hear that Marie Antoinette was never guillotined, but succumbed at seventy to dropsy at Schönbrunn; we know it is proved that Jeanne d'Arc married and died, *bonne bourgeoise*, at Orleans, and her family enjoyed a pension for three generations from the town. It is very distressing, but it is all proved from the archives. Why shouldn't you drink chocolate? Perhaps you do not like it. Men like nothing that has sugar in it, except flattery. Ring. They will bring you anything else.'

Othmar looked at her without speaking. Something of the impotent rage against her with which he had left her in Paris awoke in him under the sting of her ever dulcet tones, in which a little tone of mockery could be felt rather than heard.

He rose abruptly.

'Have you never loved anyone?' he asked.

She lifted her eyebrows with impatience and astonishment.

'*Vous voila emballé*! Dear Othmar, I should like you so much if you would not always revert to that old theme. You are a man of the world, or you ought to be one. Be amusing, even be instructive if you like; I do not mind being instructed, but do not be romantic. Nobody is nowadays; not even the novelists.'

Othmar appeared scarcely to hear her.

'Did you never love anyone?' he repeated.

She laughed a little.

'You speak as if I were forty years old, with a cabinet full of old letters and faded roses! No; I never loved anybody, not even Platon!'

The notion suggested in her last words tickled her fancy so much that she laughed outright.

'I suppose,' she continued, 'somewhere in the world there are women who have loved Platon; but it seems too funny. He is always eating when he is not drinking; he is always smoking when he is not sleeping; *admettons, donc*, that Cupid must fly from his presence. How grave you look. I believe you have something of the Eastern in you, and think that all women should be prostrate before their husbands. There is a good deal of that idea among the moujiks; it must be very agreeable—for the man.'

'Why did you marry him?' said Othmar, gloomily; it hurt his sense of honour to speak of Napraxine in Napraxine's house; yet he could not repress the question.

'Oh, my friend, why do girls always marry?' she said, indifferently. 'Because the marriage is there; because the families have arranged it; because one does not know; because one wishes for freedom, for jewels, for the world; because one does not care to be a *fillette*, chaperoned at every step. There are many reasons that make one marry: it is the thing to do—everyone does it; when a girl sees the young married women, she sees them flirted with, sought, monopolising everything; it is like standing behind a shut door and hearing people laughing and singing on the other side, while you cannot get to them; besides, Platon did as well as anybody else, he is more good-natured than most; he never interferes; he is very peaceable——'

'How long ago is it? Five years—six? Why could I not meet you before?'

She smiled, not displeased.

'It is seven years. Oh, I do not think it would have done at all; you are too arrogant; we should have quarrelled before a month was out. Besides, I should have tormented you to do all manner of impossibilities; with your immense power, I should have expected you to buy me an empire.'

Othmar was very pale; the possibility of which she jested so airily was one he could not think of without a mist before his eyes, a quickening of his heart. He hesitated to say what rose to his lips; she would only call it *vieux jeu*.

'I think you might be a great man, Othmar, if you were not Othmar,' she pursued.

'I do not feel the capabilities,' he replied.

'That is because you are what you are,' she answered. 'You are something like the king of England. A king of England might have all the talents, but he could never be a great man because his position binds him hand and foot, and makes a lay figure of him. You are not a lay figure, but the very fact that you are Otho Othmar prevents your being anything besides. I think, if I were you, I should buy some great sunshiny fantastic

eastern kingdom, and reign there; you might lead the life of a Haroun al Raschid, and forget all about our stupid Europe with its big dinners, its blundering politics, its unreal religions, and its hideous dress.'

'A charming dream—if you were with me.'

'Oh, no; you would not want me; you would have two thousand slaves, each more beautiful than the others.'

'All my life I shall want you!'

He spoke under his breath. He was leaning back in his chair; his face was cold, almost stern, but his eyes were ardent and full of passion. All night at Millo he had sworn to himself that never again would he succumb to her influence or allow her to triumph in the power she possessed over him, but in her presence he was unnerved, and unable to keep silent. She, lying back amongst her cushions, glanced at him under her long lashes, and understood very well the strife which went on in his soul; the pride of manhood which combated the impulses of passion; the impetus which could not be resisted, the impatience of his own weakness which vibrated through his confession.

'What was the use of your going to Mongolia; you could not escape *me*,' she thought, with a little of that contemptuous indulgence which she always felt for her lovers' follies, and a little of a newer and more personal gratification; for Othmar touched a certain chord in her mind, a certain pulse in her heart, which others had not done. There was nothing commonplace or trivial in him. There was a vague power, unused but existent, which commanded her respect. Nadine Napraxine despised the world too heartily herself not to have sympathy with the indifference he felt for his own potentialities and possessions. He was one of the masters of the world, and he only wished for one thing on earth—herself. There was a flattery in that which pleased even her, sated with compliment though she was. There were moments when she thought that if she had met him before, as he said, there would have been less ennui and more warmth in her life. 'Only we should have been so sure to have tired of each other,' she reflected. 'People always do; it is the fault of marriage; it compels people at the onset to see so much of one another that they have nothing new left with which to meet the future. If you heard the best of Bach every day, you would get to hate Bach as intensely as you hate a street organ; the music would still be perfect, but it could not withstand incessant repetition. We should have been quite idylically in love for a few months; I am sure we should; but then we should have each gone our several ways, and in the end he would have been hardly better than Platon.'

Aloud, however, she only said, with a little smile:

'You should never say things straight out like that, Othmar. You should never go beyond a suggestion. The world has spoilt you so greatly that it has let you get blunt. It is a pity. When

I talk to people I always feel as Boucher said he felt when he talked with his lady-love. "J'aime tout ce qu'elle va dire; je n'aime rien de ce qu'elle dit." If we could only always remain at the stage when we are just going to speak!'

Othmar did not reply. His face was very pale; it had a set stern look, as though he exercised great self-repression. He was angered against himself for being there; for having let her lead him thither merely to be made the sport of her subtle and sarcastic intelligence. It seemed to him that if his passion were unwelcome to her his presence should be unwelcome too.

She guessed his thoughts with that rapid intuition which is the gift of such minds as hers.

'Oh, I am not like that,' she said, with some unspoken amusement; 'I am not startled at a confession like yours, as a horse starts at a pistol shot. It seems to me that men are never happy unless they are talking in that kind of way to some woman who does not belong to them. They are so like children! In Petersburg, last year, I saw Sachs crying for a sentinel's cartouche-box because he could not have it. He had all Giroux's shop in his own nursery, but that did not do. You are like Sachs. Ought I to ring the bell and dismiss you? Why should I? I do not think so. Only very primitive beings take fright at declarations. Besides, you made me so many in Paris, and then you went to the Mongols. I never knew why you went to the Mongols; why did you go?'

'Wounded brutes always get away somewhere to be unseen as long as their wound bleeds,' said Othmar, with some bitterness.

'How Sachs cried for that cartouche-box!' she said, as she lit a cigarette. 'His women scolded him, but I said to them, "Why do you scold him? He is a male creature; therefore he must weep for what he cannot get." Some children cry for the moon; a moon, or a cartouche-box, or a woman, the principle is the same.'

Othmar rose and approached her. He seemed scarcely to have heard her jest.

'Nadége, hear me a moment,' he said, in a low tone, through whose enforced calmness there was the thrill of an intense passion. 'You are not alarmed at declarations; they are nothing to you, you neither requite nor reject them; they amuse you, that is all. You are used to do just what you please with men; I understand that you despise them so far as you deign to think of them seriously.'

'Despise, no!' she said, with a little gesture of deprecation; 'that is too strong. Why should I despise them for acting according to their natures? I do not desire cartouche-boxes myself, but I did not despise Sachs.'

'I told you in Paris,' pursued Othmar, 'that I would not add one to the list of those whom you have made ridiculous in the

eyes of the world. I will be all to a woman, or nothing to her. You would have let me swell the cortége that marks your triumphal passage; you would have let me fill the place that Lord Geraldine occupies now. You would have allowed me to drive with you, dine with you, come in and out of your house, take your husband away when he bored you, do everything that Lord Geraldine is permitted to do now; and you would have repaid me as you repay him, by a little laugh, a smile now and then, a vague liking which would have grown, little by little, into contempt! I would not accept that place in your household. I would not then. I left you, though it cost me more than you would ever know or pity, for you do not understand what love is. I went away; I desired to escape from you. I did escape. I desired also to forget you, but I could not forget. You are not a woman who can be forgotten; you are like one of those *miséricordes* with which they stabbed men in the Valois days, that look like mere threads of silver sheathed in velvet, and yet can go home through breast and bone, and kill more surely than swords that are as high as a man's shoulder——'

He paused a moment; he breathed quickly and heavily; she looked up, holding her little cigarette suspended:

'I am like a great many things,' she murmured; 'I thought Wilkes exhausted all possibilities in comparison this morning. Go on! you are very *entreprenant*, but it rather becomes you; you may go on if you like.'

He dropped on his knee beside her:

'No, I would not be what Geraldine is; you tolerate him now, to scorn him immeasurably hereafter. His own weakness will be the measure of your scorn. He has never dared to say to you what I said to you in Paris, what I say now: love me, or I will not see your face again, except as society may compel me to see it in a crowd. Listen, Nadine! I love you, only you; I never thought to love any woman so; but I love you as men did in the old times, and there is nothing I will not surrender to you save my own self-respect. If to meet you, to touch your hand, to hear your voice, I must come and go like a dog in your husband's house, petted one day, chidden the next, absurd in my own sight and emasculated in the sight of others, I will wrench my love for you out of my life if my life goes with it! Last night I heard someone who did not know him inquire who Geraldine was; someone else answered him, "Oh, that is one of Princess Napraxine's *ensorcelés*; she never looks at him, but he is content to follow her shadow." You know me very little if you believe I would ever let the world speak of me like that. I told you in Paris I would never be the trembling valet of a bloodless Platonism!'

She looked at him, and a gleam of admiration passed into her eyes for a moment; she breathed a trifle more quickly; she thought

to herself: 'He is superb when he looks and speaks like that! *C'est un homme celui-là!*'

She did not speak, she leaned back amongst her cushions with a little look of expectancy upon her face; the whole thing pleased her, as some admirable piece of acting on the boards of the Théâtre Français pleased at once her eye, her ear, and her taste.

But Othmar was passionately in earnest; all his heart was in his lips, all his passions had found voice. He could scarcely see her for the red mist that swam before his eyes, for the tumult of his senses. He dropped on his knee beside her.

'Nadine,' he murmured, as his forehead touched her hand, 'I have told you what I will not do; let me tell you what I will do. I will do as you say, I will buy some sunlit kingdom far away in the heart of Asia, and I will take you to it and obey every breath of your mouth as my one divine law. I will turn my back on Europe once and for ever; I will let men call me a coward, a fool, an infidel; what they will; I will give all my present and all my future to you and to you alone; all I possess shall only exist to minister to you; I will be your slave, body and mind and will; but only *so*—only if you give yourself to me as absolutely in return, only if you come with me where nothing of this world which we have known shall pursue us to remind me that you were ever else than mine.'

His forehead burned her hand as it touched her, his voice was passionate in its emotion and eloquence, his heart beat so loudly that it was audible in the stillness around them. For once she was touched, almost awed; for once the electricity of the passion she excited communicated something of its fire and thrill to her. She was silent a few moments, her eyelids closed, her lips parted. she felt a vague pleasure in the contact of this intense and imperious love. He saw upon her delicate features a change of colour, a flicker of emotion, which no one else had ever seen there; but she motioned him farther away from her with that dislike to any concession and that sensitive hauteur which but added to her charm.

She smiled a little, but there was an accent which was almost tenderness in her voice as she said to him: '"C'est de ne rien perdre de beaucoup prier!" You evidently have belief in that saying. It is to ask a very great deal, but then you would give a great deal in your turn. Go away now; I will think. No, I shall not answer you; I want time for thought. Be satisfied that I am not offended, and go. I ought to be so, I suppose, but I am not. Go.'

'I may come back?'

His heart beat eagerly and exultantly. He was not refused or dismissed! 'Château qui parle, femme qui écoute'—the old proverb drifted through his thoughts, all confused as they were in a tumult of hope and desire, and triumph and doubt. A moment's

hesitation from her was more concession than a thousand caresses from a humbler woman.

'I may come back?' he repeated, as she remained silent.

'If you like, we shall meet in other places; yes, you may return in a fortnight—at this time—in this room, then I will tell you.'

'In a fortnight!'—it seemed to him to be ten years.

'Be thankful for so much,' she said, as she gave him the tips of her fingers. 'Now go. Mahmoud is in the antechamber.'

He kissed her hand with lips that burned like fire, bowed low and obeyed her. Nadine Napraxine remained motionless, her eyes were closed, her mouth smiled; she seemed to dream.

CHAPTER XIV.

When her husband and her guests came downstairs at one o'clock, they found the Princess Nadine looking her loveliest.

'Oh, you lazy people!' she cried to them. 'Are you any the better for sleeping like that? Look at me. I have been swimming half an hour; I have dictated twenty letters; I have scolded the gardeners, and I have seen three boxes from Worth unpacked; it is only one o'clock, and I can already feel as good a conscience as Titus. I have already saved my day.'

'I dare say you have only been doing mischief,' said Lady Brancepeth. 'I should like to see the letters before I judge of the excellence of your actions.'

'Anyone might see the letters; they are all orders, or invitations, or refusals of invitations; quite stupid, but very useful; epistolary omnibus horses driven by the secretary. When I had done with them, I had my half hour's swim. What nonsense the doctors talk about not swimming in winter: the chill of the water is delicious. In summer one always fancies the sea has been boiled. Platon, if you had not gone to bed, you would have seen your friend Othmar. He was here for half an hour.'

'Othmar!' exclaimed the Prince. 'Here at that time of the morning?'

'He does not want to go to sleep,' she retorted. 'He had his chocolate with me, and then rowed himself back to S. Pharamond and Baron Fritz.'

Lady Brancepeth glanced at her.

'You have certainly done a great deal, Nadine, while we have been only dozing,' she said drily. The Princess looked at her good-humouredly, with her little dubious smile.

'There is always something to do if one only look for it. You feel so satisfied with yourself too when you have been useful before one o'clock.'

'Othmar!' repeated the Prince. 'If I had known, I would have come downstairs.'

'My dear Platon, you would have done nothing of the kind; you would have sworn at your man for disturbing you, and would have turned round and gone to sleep again. Besides, what do you want with Othmar? You do not care about "getting on a good thing," nor even about suggesting a loan for Odessa.'

'I like Othmar,' said Napraxine with perfect sincerity. His wife looked at him, with her little dubious smile. 'It is always so with them,' she thought. 'They always like just the one man of all others——!'

'I suppose, if I had done quite what I ought, I should have asked Othmar to "put me on" something,' she said aloud. 'It is not every day that one has one of the masters of the world all alone at eight o'clock in the morning.'

'The masters of the world always find their Cleopatras,' said Lady Brancepeth. 'At La Jacquemerille, perhaps, as well as in Egypt.'

'Cleopatra must have been a very stupid woman,' said Nadine Napraxine, 'to be able to think of nothing but that asp!'

'I do not know that it was so very stupid; it was a good *réclame*. It has sent her name down to us.'

'Anthony alone would have done that. A woman lives by her lovers. Who would have heard of Héloïse, of Beatrice, of Leonora d'Este?——'

'You are very modest for us. Perhaps without the women the men might never have been immortal.'

'I cannot think why you sent Othmar away,' repeated Prince Napraxine. 'I wanted especially to know if they take up the Russian loan——'

'I did not send him away, he went,' replied his wife, with a little smile; 'and you know he will never allow anyone to talk finance to him.'

'That is very absurd. He cannot deny that his House lives by finance.'

'He would certainly never deny it, but he dislikes the fact; you cannot force it on him, my dear Platon, in the course of breakfast chit-chat. I am sure your manners are better than that. Besides, if you did commit such a rudeness, you would get nothing by it. I believe he never tells a falsehood, but he will never tell the truth unless he chooses. And I suppose, too, that financiers are like cabinet ministers—they have a right to lie if they like.'

'I am sure Othmar does not lie,' said Napraxine.

'I dare say he is as truthful as most men of the world. Truth is not a social virtue; tact is a much more amiable quality. Truth says to one, "You have not a good feature in your face;" tact says to one, "You have an exquisite expression." Perhaps both

facts are equally true; but the one only sees what is unpleasant, the other only sees what is agreeable. There can be no question which is the pleasanter companion.'

'Othmar has admirable tact——'

'How your mind runs upon Othmar! Kings generally acquire a great deal of tact from the obligation to say something agreeable to so many strangers all their lives. He is a kind of king in his way. He has learnt the kings' art of saying a few phrases charmingly with all his thoughts elsewhere. It is creditable to him, for he has no need to be popular, he is so rich.'

'Ask him to dinner to-morrow or Sunday.'

'If you wish. But he will not come; he dislikes dinners as much as I do. It is the most barbarous method of seeing one's friends.'

'There is no other so genial.'

She rose with a little shrug of her shoulders. She seldom honoured Napraxine by conversing so long with him.

'Order the horses, Ralph,' she said to Lord Geraldine; 'I want a long gallop.'

'She has had some decisive scene with Othmar,' thought Lady Brancepeth, 'and she is out of humour; she always rides like a Don Kossack when she is irritated.'

'There is no real riding here,' said the Princess, as she went to put on her habit. 'One almost loves Russia when one thinks of the way one can ride there; of those green eternal steppes, those illimitable plains, with no limit but the dim grey horizon, your black Ukrane horse, bounding like a deer, flying like a zephyr; it is worth while to remain in Russia to gallop so, on a midsummer night, with not a wall or a fence all the way between you and the Caspian Sea. I think if I were always in Russia I should become such a poet as Maïkoff: those immense distances are inspiration.'

She rode with exquisite grace and spirit; an old Kossack had taught her, as a child, the joys of the saddle, on those lonely and dreamful plains, which had always held since a certain place in her heart. That latent energy and daring, which found no scope in the life of the world, made her find pleasure in the strong stride of the horse beneath her, in the cleaving of the air at topmost speed. The most indolent of *mondaines* at all other times, when she sprang into the saddle as lightly as a bird on a bough, she was transformed; her slender hands had a grip of steel, her delicate face flushed with pleasure, the fiery soul of her fathers woke in her—of the men who had ridden out with their troopers to hunt down the Persian and the Circassian; who had swept like storm-clouds over those shadowy steppes which she loved; who had had their part or share in all the tragic annals of Russia; who had slain their foes at the steps of the throne, in the holiness of the cloister; who had been amongst those whose

swords had found the heart of Catherine's son, and whose voices had cried to the people in the winter's morning, 'Paul, the son of Peter, is dead; pray for his soul!' If she were cruel—now and then—was it not in her blood?

Meanwhile Yseulte was helping her foster-mother to pack the roses, to go to England for a great ball, in their little hermetically-sealed boxes. The roses were not wholly opened before they were thus shut away from light and air into darkness. They would not wither in their airless cells, but they would pale a little in that dull sad voyage from the sunshine to the frost and fog. As she laid the rosebuds—pink, white, and pale yellow—one by one on their beds of moss, she thought for the first time wistfully that her fate was very like theirs; only the rosebuds, perhaps, when they should be taken out of their prisons at their journey's end, though they would have but a very few hours of life before them, yet would bloom a little, if mournfully, in the northern land, and see the light again, if only for a day. But her life would be shut into silence and darkness for ever; she would not even live the rose's life '*l'espace d'un matin.*'

CHAPTER XV.

When Othmar went out from her presence, he was more near to happiness than he had been in his whole thirty years of life. He was filled with vivid, palpitating, intoxicated hope. He was passionately in love, and almost he believed himself beloved in return. As much as she had allowed to him she had certainly allowed to no living man. The very force of his passion, which had driven him to scorn the conventional court which he might have paid her in common with so many others—the spaniel's place of Geraldine, the slave's place of Boris Seliedoff—rendered him as willing to set no limits to the sacrifices which she should be free to exact from him, and he be proud to make. Only he would never share her, even in nominal union with her lawful lord. He would be all to her, or nothing.

He loathed the conventional adulteries of his time and of his society; he sighed impatiently for the means to prove that the old fearless, high-handed, single-hearted passion which sees in the whole teeming world only one life, was not dead, but lived in him for her.

He foresaw all the loss of freedom and of fair repute which would be entailed on him by the surrender of his life to her; he knew well that she was a woman who would be no docile companion or unexacting mistress; he knew that there were in her the habits of dominance, the instincts of egotism, and that *esprit*

gouailleur which compelled her, almost despite herself, to jest at what she admired, to ridicule her better emotions, to make a mockery of the very things which were the dearest to her. He did not because he loved her become blind to all that was cold, merciless, and capricious in her nature; he was conscious that she would never lose her own identity in any passion, never surrender her mind, even if she gave her person, to any lover; he knew that she would always remain outside those tropic tempests of love which she aroused and controlled, and which offended her or flattered her, according to the mood in which they found her.

He knew all these things, and was aware that his future would not be one of peace. But he loved her, and agitation, jealousy, suffering beside her would, he felt, be sweeter to him than any repose beside another. Even these defects, these dangers, which he clearly perceived, added to her sorcery for him. It is the mistress who is indifferent who excites the most vehement desires; and, by reason of his great fortunes, women had been always to him so facile, so eager, and so easily won, that the coldness of Nadine Napraxine, which he knew was a thing of temperament, not of affectation, had but the more irresistible power over him. The very sense with which she impressed everyone, himself as well as others, of being no more to be held or relied upon than the snow-flake, to which her world likened her, attracted a man who had, from his boyhood, been wearied by the adulation, insistence, and sycophancy of almost all who approached him.

The few days of his probation passed slowly over his head, seeming as though they would never end. He was restless, feverish, and absent of mind; Friederich Othmar, who, contrary to all his usual habits, remained at S. Pharamond, tranquilly ignoring the visible impatience of his host at his unasked presence, was sorely troubled by the alternate exhilaration and anxiety of spirit which all the reserve and self-possession of Othmar himself could not wholly conceal from the penetration of a person accustomed to divine and dive into the innermost recesses of the minds of men.

'What, in God's name, is he meditating?' thought his uncle. 'Some insanity probably. I should believe he was about to disappear from the world with Madame Napraxine if I were not so persuaded that her pride and her selfishness will never permit her to commit a folly for anyone. Morality is nothing to her, but her position is a great deal; her delight in being insolent will never allow her to lose the power of being so.'

So accurately did this man of the world read a character which baffled most persons by its intricacy and its anomalies.

To Friederich Othmar human nature presented many absurdities but few secrets.

He remained at S. Pharamond, despite his own abhorrence of any place which was not a capital. He passed his mornings in the consideration of his correspondence and his telegraphic de-

spatches, but in the later hours of the day and in the evenings he was that agreeable member of society whom society had known and courted for so many years; and beneath his pleasant sub-acid wit and his admirable manner his acute penetration was for ever *en vedette* to penetrate his nephew's purpose and preoccupation. But a lover, on his guard, will baffle an observer whom the keenest of statesmen would, in vain, seek to deceive or mislead, and the Baron learned nothing of Othmar's inmost thoughts. Although Othmar and Nadine Napraxine met twice or thrice in his presence at other people's houses, and once at S. Pharamond itself, where some more choice music was given one evening, the acute blue eyes of the elder man failed to read the understanding which existed between them. All he saw was that she appeared to treat Othmar, before others, with more raillery and more nonchalance than usual. He remarked that Othmar did not seem either hurt or surprised at this.

'Since he is as much in love with her as ever, he must be aware of some intimacy between them which renders him comparatively insensible to her treatment of him in society,' thought the sagacity of his uncle, who was alarmed and disquieted by a fact which would have reassured less fine observers—the fact that the master of S. Pharamond did not once, during fifteen days, cross the mile or two of olive-wood, orange orchard, and hanging field which alone separated him from La Jacquemerille.

'No love is so patient but on some promise,' he reflected. He knew the romantic turn of Othmar's character, and he feared its results as others would fear the issue of some mortal or hereditary disease. A week or two previous the ministers then presiding over the fortunes of France had met, at his little house in the Rue du Traktir, the representatives of two great Powers, and in the newspapers of the hour that informal meeting, which had led to many important results, had been called the Unwritten Treaty of Baron Fritz; and yet, at such a moment, instead of being entranced with such influence as such a nickname implied to his House, instead of being occupied with the power, the might, and the mission of the Othmars, which that gathering around the library-table in the Rue du Traktir displayed for the ten thousandth time to the dazzled eyes of suppliant and trembling Europe, Otho himself could only think of a woman with larger eyes and smaller hands than usual, but a woman absolutely useless to him in any ambitions—likely, rather, to be his ruin in all ways!

'I could understand it were she one of the great political forces of the world. Some women are that, and might so, to us, be of very high value,' thought Friederich Othmar, 'but Madame Napraxine is as indifferent to all political movement as if she were made of the ivory and mother-of-pearl which her skin resembles. If she be anything, she is that horrible thing a Nihilist, only because Nihilism embodies an endless and irreconcilable discon-

tent, which finds in her some secret corner of vague sympathy. But for politics in our meaning of the word she has the most complete contempt. What did she say to me the other day? "I am a diplomatist's daughter. I have seen the strings of all your puppets. I cannot accept a Polichinelle for a Richelieu, as you all do." And she declared that if there were no statesmen at all, and no journalists, life would go smoothly; everybody would attend to their own affairs, the world would be quiet, and there would be no wars. What but disaster can such a woman with such views bring into the life of Otho, already paralysed as it is by poco-curantism?'

He asked the question of himself in his own meditations, and could give himself no answer save one which grieved and alarmed him.

Othmar himself bestowed on his guest but little thought except a passing impatience that his uncle should have taken that moment, of all others, to instal himself at S. Pharamond.

He had not the cynicism nor the *insouciance* of the woman he adored. He did not attempt any sophisms with his own conscience. He knew that to do a man dishonour was to do him a violence unkinder, and perhaps even in a way baser, than to take his life. But he was ready to pledge himself to that which, unlike her, he still considered was a sin. He was entirely mastered by a force of passion which she could have understood by the subtlety of her intelligence, but was not likely ever to share by any fibre of her nature. He was lost in that whirlpool of emotion, anticipation, and fear which carried his inner life away on it, although his outer life remained in appearance calm enough for no eyes save those of the Baron to penetrate the disguise of his serenity.

Yseulte he had forgotten.

The simple and innocent tenderness which she had momentarily aroused in him could not hold its place beside the overwhelming passion which governed him, more than a slender soft-eyed dove can dispute possession with the fierce, strong-pinioned falcon. Once or twice he saw her and spoke to her with kindness, but his thoughts were far away from her, and he did not linger beside her, although each time he chanced to meet her on the way to her foster-mother's, in lonely lovely country paths, which might well have tempted him to tarry.

On the thirteenth day of his probation, the priest's gown which, to please her, he had ordered for the church of S. Pharamond, arrived at the château, and, his attention being drawn to it by his servants, he remembered his promise to her. It was the last day of the year. A passing remembrance of pity came over him as he thought of her; she was so entirely alone, and she would go to the life of the cloister; a fancy came to him to do some little thing to give her pleasure; a mere evanescent breath

of innocent impulse, which passed like the cool breeze of an April day, sweet with scent of field flowers, across the heated atmosphere of desire and expectation in which his soul was then living. Conventional etiquette had seldom troubled him greatly; he had always enjoyed something of that sense which princes have, that whatever he did the world would condone. A man of the exceptional power which he possessed can always exercise on his contemporaries more or less of his own will. Whatever he might have done no one would have said of him anything more severe than that he was singular.

When he went into Nice that day he chanced to see a very pretty thing, modern, but admirable in taste and execution—a casket of ivory mounted on silver, with a little angel in silver on the summit. On its sides were painted in delicate miniatures reproductions of Fra Angelico and Botticelli. It was signed by a famous miniaturist, and cost ten thousand francs. Othmar, to whom the price seemed no more than ten centimes, bought it at once.

'It will please her,' he thought. 'It shall go to her with the soutane;' and he sent it with the vestment to Millo, addressed to Mademoiselle de Valogne. His knowledge of etiquette told him that he ought to send it, if he sent it at all, through the Duchesse; but he did not choose to obey etiquette; he had discarded social rules, more or less, all his life, according to his inclination, and people had not resented his rebellion simply because he was who he was. He utterly disobeyed etiquette now, and sent his present direct to Yseulte very early on the morning of the New Year.

It did not occur to him that he might only run the risk of cruelly compromising the poor child. He gave hardly more thought to the action than he would have given to a rose which he might have broken off its stalk to offer to her. All his heart had gone with the basket of flowers which he had sent at sunrise to Nadine Napraxine, who allowed no other offering.

The chances were a million to one that his casket would never reach its destination without being seen, if not intercepted, by the governesses; but as it happened, his messenger gave it to the gatekeeper, and the gatekeeper gave it in turn to the woman who served her as maid during her stay at Millo, and who was passing through the gates, on her way home from matins. The woman was attached to her; indeed, being a religious person herself, considered that Yseulte was the only creature whose presence saved Millo from the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah; therefore, pleased that the girl should have pleasure, she carried the packet straight to her as she rose from her bed; and in the cold, misty morning of the New Year the first thing that greeted the astonished eyes of Yseulte was the Coronation of the Virgin, glowing like a jewel on the side of the ivory casket.

The whole day passed to her in an enchanted rapture.

In the large, idle, careless household there was a general exchange of congratulations and *étrennes*, and a pleasant tumult of good wishes and merriment. Blanchette and Toinon danced about before a pyramid of bonbons and costly playthings, and the Duchesse, descending at her usual hour, two o'clock, gave and received a multitude of felicitations, gifts, and visits. 'The most tedious day of the whole three hundred and sixty-five,' she said pettishly, giving her cheek to the touch of her children's pale little lips.

In the many occupations and ennuis of the day no one heard or knew anything of Othmar's present. At noon some bouquets of roses and some orchids, laid on a plate of old *cloisonné* enamel, were brought in his name to Madame de Vannes, but she knew nothing of her cousin's casket. Meanwhile nothing could hurt Yseulte. The contempt with which her little cousins received the gifts she had made for them in the convent, the oblivion to which she was consigned by every one, the carelessness with which the Duchesse received her timidly-offered good wishes, the severity with which the governesses forbade her to go out in such weather to see Nicole or attend Mass in the little church, the unconcealed ill-temper with which Alain de Vannes flung her a word of greeting—none of these things had any power to wound her; she scarcely perceived them; she was lifted up into a world all her own. Unnoticed in the general *branle-bas* of the day, she passed the hours, when she was not at Mass in the chapel, locked safely in her own room, before her treasure, in a rapt happiness, in a wonder of ecstasy, which were so intense that she feared they were cardinal sins.

The weather was cold, some snow had even fallen, and the north winds blew, making all the chilly foreigners gathered on those shores shiver and grumble like creatures defrauded of their rights; but all the grey, cheerless, misty landscape, and the fog upon the sea, appeared more beautiful to her than they had ever done before in its sunshine. From her window she looked at the towers of S. Pharamond, and on her table—all her own—was the ivory casket.

The Duchesse de Vannes, waking in the forenoon after the Jour de l'An, cross, peevish, sleepy, and yet sleepless, which is, in itself, the most irritating and dispiriting of all human conditions, and morbidly conscious that, as her little daughter had said, she was beginning to *baisser un peu*, was in a mood of natural resentment against all creation in general and the human race in particular, and quite ready to vent her ill-humour on the first object which offered itself. That first object was one of the little prim notes by which her children's instructresses were wont to communicate any terrible event in the schoolroom, or any entreaty for guidance when Mademoiselle Blanchette had insisted on riding the wooden horses at a village fair, or Mademoiselle Toinon

had dressed herself up in the smallest groom's clothes. 'Ne m'ennuyez pas; vous savez vos devoirs,' was the only reply they ever received; but the good women continued to write the notes as a relief to their consciences. They wrote one now, signed in their joint names, humbly entreating to be informed if it were the pleasure of Madame la Duchesse that Mdlle. de Valogne should receive presents of which the donor was unknown. Mdlle. de Valogne was in possession of a new and very valuable locket; they believed also that she was in the habit of going to the gardens of S. Pharamond; they had deemed it their duty to acquaint Madame la Duchesse, &c., &c.

Blanchette, with the most innocent face in the world, had said to them, 'I have seen the big pearl locket of Yseulte! *Oh, vrai*! When I am as old, I will not hide my handsome things as she does. Who gave it her? Who do you think could give it to her? She is friends with that gentleman at S. Pharamond—the one that is as rich as M. de Rothschild. I think he gave it her! Do you tell mamma.'

Blanchette guessed very shrewdly that her father had given the locket; but she was too wary to offend him. Blanchette was like the little cats who steal round and round to their mouse by devious paths unseen. She had alarmed the governesses, and the prim note was the consequence.

When the Duchesse read it, she flung it away in a corner. '*Tas d'imbéciles*,' she said, contemptuously; then said to one of her maids, 'Request Mdlle. de Valogne to come hither.'

Yseulte was presented in a fortuitous moment as the whipping-boy on whom could be spent all that useless irritation which she could not spend on the real offenders, her ineffective chloral, her increasing wrinkles, and the indifference of Raymond de Prangins.

'Mamma is always cross,' the wise little Blanchette had reflected. 'She is always angry, even for nothing. That great baby will get a lecture, and she will be sure to say it was papa; she always tells the truth—such a simpleton!—and papa will hate her for ever and for ever!'

Then Blanchette made a *pied de nez* all by herself in her little bedroom: when you were a child you could not have many things your own way, but you could spoil other people's things very neatly with a little pat here, a little poke there, if you looked all the while like your picture by Baudry, an innocent cherub with sweet smiling eyes, who could not have made a *pied de nez* to save your life. Blanchette had already acquired the knowledge that this was how the world was most easily managed.

When Yseulte was summoned to her cousin's presence, the girl was startled to see how old she looked, for it was scarcely noon, and the handsome face which 'Cri-Cri' was wont to present to her own world had scarcely received its finishing touches from

the various embellishing *petits secrets* shut up in their silver boxes and their china pots, which were strewn about under the great Dresden-framed mirror in front of her.

'Good-day,' she said, with irritation already in her voice, as Yseulte timidly kissed her hand. 'Is this true what they tell me, that you receive presents without my knowledge and consent? Do you not know that it is perfectly *inconvenable*? Are you not taught enough of the world in your convent to be aware that a young girl cannot do such things without being disgraced eternally? What is it you have accepted? Is it a jewel? Can you realise the enormity of your action?——' she paused, in some irritation and uncertainty. 'Well, why do you not speak? Can you excuse yourself? What is it you have taken? From whom have you taken it? My people have told me you have a new and valuable jewel and refuse to say who gave it.'

'My cousin, M. le Duc, gave it me,' said Yseulte. 'He said that I was to tell you if you asked me, but not anyone else.'

She spoke frankly, without any hesitation. The Duchesse stared at her, half rose in her amazement; her face was dark with anger for a moment, then cleared into a sudden laughter.

'My husband!' she echoed. 'A *fillette* like you! And they say there are no miracles now! Do you absolutely mean to say that Alain gave you a jewel?——'

'He was so good as to give me a locket—yes,' murmured Yseulte, conscious that her cousin was angry, insolent, and derisive, and afraid that the Duc would be irritated at the issue of his kindness to her.

'Pray, has he given you anything else?' echoed Madame de Vannes. 'Has he given you the diamonds he had bought for Mdlle. Rubis, or the *coupé* from Bender's which he meant for *la grande* Laure?'

'He has not given me anything else,' answered Yseulte, to whom these terrible names conveyed no meaning.

'Where is this locket? Show it me.'

'It is in my room. Shall I fetch it?'

'No, no. It does not matter. You can send it me. I will send Agnès for it. The idea of Alain having even looked at you! —it makes one laugh; it is too absurd.'

She continued to laugh, but the laughter did not convey to the ear of Yseulte any impression either that she was pardoned or that her cousin was amused. It was a laugh expressive of irony, irritation, wonder, contempt, rancour, all in one.

'You should not have taken it. You should have told me,' continued the Duchesse. 'To be sure, he is your cousin. But it is not proper to take a man's gifts. It is not becoming. It is too forward. It is even immodest. Is that the sort of thing the Dames de Ste. Anne have taught you? Surely you might have known better.'

These phrases she uttered in a staccato rapid succession, as if she thought little of what she said; she was indeed thinking as the girl stood before her:

'What a skin! What shoulders! What a throat! What a thing it is to be sixteen! Why did not *le bon Dieu* make all that last longer with us? It goes too soon; so horribly soon; after one is five-and-twenty it is all one can do to make up decently. If it were only the complexion which went it would not matter; that one can easily arrange; but it is the features that change; they grow out or they grow in; the mouth gets thin or the cheeks get broad; the very lines alter somehow, and we cannot alter that; and then to make oneself up is as much trouble as to build a house, and the house has to be built anew every day!—it is horribly hard—and yet one has compensations, revenges; it is not those children whom men care to look at though they are fresh as roses; at least not usually. Alain, I suppose, does—what can he mean by giving her a medallion?'

While these thoughts ran through her mind, she was staring hard at Yseulte through her eyeglass, as though they had never met before then. The girl had coloured scarlet at the epithet 'immodest,' but it had made her a little angry, with the righteous indignation of innocence. Respect kept her mute, but her face spoke for her.

'Alain was right; she is really handsome,' reflected the Duchesse.

She was herself only eight-and-twenty, but in the world as on the racecourse it is the pace that kills; and before she had passed through all those arduous processes which she had rightly compared to building a house anew every day, she knew very well that she looked cruelly old, though after two o'clock in the day she was still one of the great beauties of France.

She had been immersed in pleasures, pastimes, and excitements from the day of her marriage; she had lived in a crowd, she had gambled not a little, and she had had certain intrigues, of whose dangers she had at times a vivid and anxious consciousness, for the Duc was indifferent but not base, and might any day be roused if he came to be aware that men laughed at him more than he liked. As a rule, she and he understood each other very well, and tacitly condoned each other's indiscretions; but there might come a time when he would break that convenient compact, as she felt disposed now to resent his admiration of her young cousin. On the whole, perhaps, she mused, she had been wrong to do so: she would let the girl keep his present; he might, if she provoked him, insist that Raymond de Prangins should leave Millo. All these reflections occurred to her during that one minute in which her eyeglass watched the indignation rise in Yseulte's face.

'Have you seen M. de Vannes alone?' she resumed, with a

sharpness in her voice, due rather to her own sense of the girl's beauty than to her knowledge of her husband's admiration for it.

'Now and then,' said Yseulte, without hesitation. 'He has come into the schoolroom——'

'For a lesson in A B C, I suppose?—or a cup of Brown's green tea?' said the Duchesse contemptuously. 'Well, he may *conter ses fleurettes ailleurs*. I should have thought he had had better taste than to begin in his own house: however,' she continued, interrupting herself, as she remembered that she was suggesting, 'I do not suppose it is you who are to blame. But another time, ask my permission before you accept anything from anybody. I will not deprive you of the Duc's gift. He is in a manner your cousin—your guardian—of course he meant very kindly, but another time remember to come to me. You will tell the Duc that I said so.'

'Good heavens!' she was thinking, 'who would have supposed that Alain had a taste for a creature like that, half a saint and half a baby? To be sure, her eyes are superb, and the throat and bosom—what beautiful lines they have; why did they send her here? She shall go back next week. The wickedness of the thing would charm him; the nearer it was to a crime, the more of a *clou* it would be. To play Faust under the respectable shade of Brown's teapot and the big dictionaries would be sure to enthral him, out of its very drollery—men are made like that.'

Then a remembrance of S. Pharamond passed over her, and she said aloud, with an unkind sarcasm in her voice:

'Perhaps you have other friends beside M. de Vannes? Pray tell me if you have. I fully appreciate the effects of the education which the Dames de Ste. Anne have given you.'

Yseulte coloured scarlet, and the Duchesse's eyes scanned her face as Blanchette's had done, without mercy.

'Pray tell me,' she continued, with a chill dignity, which was in sharp contrast with the sarcasm and railing of her previous manner. 'You will be so good as to remember that I stand in the place of your mother; your indiscretions are not alone painful to me, but compromising to me. Is it true that you are intimate with Otho Othmar?

'He has been kind to me,' murmured Yseulte, an agony at her heart and the hot tears standing in her eyes. She did not understand enough of the world to justify herself by the fact that the offender had been presented to her by her cousin herself; nor, if she had done so, would the position she stood in towards Madame de Vannes have allowed her to use such a justification without apparent impertinence. For eight years she had owed everything to the Duchesse.

'Kind to you!' echoed her cousin, 'a most fortuitous phrase, but not one that young girls can employ except to their own

ridicule and injury. Pray how has he been kind to you? has *he* given you a locket?'

Yseulte might easily have told a lie; no one knew of the casket, no one could tell of it; she loved it more dearly than anything she had ever possessed. But she had been taught in her childhood that falsehood was cowardice, and the courage of the de Valogne was in her; therefore she answered, with an unsteady voice indeed, but with entire truthfulness, 'He has given me a very beautiful box; it is made of ivory and painted, it came yesterday——'

Madame de Vannes burst into another laugh, which jarred on the child's ear:

'Really,' she cried, relapsing into the manner most natural to her, 'you begin well! Othmar and my husband! and you are not quite sixteen yet, and we all thought you such a little demure saint in your grey clothes! Send the casket to me. You cannot receive presents in that way. From your cousin, *passe encore*, but from a man like Othmar—you might as well go and sup with him at Bignon's. Good heavens! What are Schemmitz and Brown about that they have let you meet him? Where have you seen him? How have you become intimate with him?'

Yseulte had become very pale. She had done her duty; done what honour, truth, obedience, and gratitude all required; but it had cost her a great effort, and she would lose the casket.

'I have only seen him three times,' she said, with her colour changing: and she went on to tell the story of her visit to his gardens, of his conversation with her on the seashore, of the priest's soutane, and of their meeting at the house of Nicole. It was a very simple inoffensive little story, but it hurt her greatly to tell it; cost her quite as much as it would have done Madame de Vannes to unfold all her manifold indiscretions in full confession before a *conseil de famille*.

'He has been very kind to me,' she said timidly, as she finished her little tale, 'and if—if—if you would only let me keep the casket and take it to Faël?'

The Duchesse laughed once more:

'You do not care to keep the Duc's locket—how flattering to him! Really, *fillette*, you are sagacious betimes; I would never have believed you such a cunning little cat! Did you learn all that at the convent? you convent-girls are more *rusées* than so many rats! Othmar, of all men of the world! My dear, you might as well wish for an emperor. There is not a marriageable woman in Europe who does not sigh for Othmar! He is so enormously rich! There is no one else rich like that; all the other financiers have a tribe of people belonging to them. "The family" is everywhere, at Paris, at Vienna, at Berlin, at London, and have as many branches as the oak; but Othmar is absolutely alone—for old Baron Fitz does not count—he is absolutely alone, that is what is unique in him. Whoever marries him will be the most

fortunate woman in Europe. Yes, I say it advisedly, it is fortune that is power nowadays; our day is over; we do not even lead society any longer.'

The colour had rushed back into Yseulte's face; the Duchesse's words tortured her as only a very young and sensitive creature can be tortured by an indelicate and cruel suspicion. 'I never thought, I never meant,' she murmured. 'You know, my cousin, I am dedicated to the religious life; you cannot suppose that I—I——' The words choked her.

'*Ne pleurnichez pas, de grâce*!' said the Duchesse impatiently. 'I have no doubt you have taken all kinds of impossibilities into your head, girls are always so foolish; but you may be sure that the gift of the casket means nothing—nothing. Othmar is always giving away, right and left; most very rich men are mean, but he is not. It was a wrong thing, an impertinent thing, for him to do, and it must be returned to him instantly; but if you imagine you have made any impression upon him, I can assure you you are very mistaken; he only thinks of Nadine Napraxine.'

Yseulte remained very pale; her eyes were cast down, her lips were pressed together. She had done her duty and told the truth, but she was not recompensed.

The Duchesse rang for her maids. To the one who answered the summons, she said: 'Accompany Mdlle. de Valogne to her room, and bring me a casket she will give you, which is to be sold for the Little Sisters of the Poor. *Va-t'-en, Yseulte.*'

She put out her hand carelessly, and the girl bent over her.

'My cousin! I have never seen him but three times,' she murmured again. Her face was very pale; she had been wounded profoundly by the Duchesse's words, even though their full meaning was not known to her.

Madame de Vannes laughed again; then, with an assumption of dignity, which she could take on at will, said coldly:

'Once was too much. Never accuse accident; no one believes in it. Remember also that, as one vowed to the service of Heaven, it is already sin in you if you harbour one earthly thought. Go, and send me the casket.'

Without another word Yseulte curtsied and withdrew from her presence.

When the maid returned, she brought her mistress the ivory casket; but inside it was the Duc's medallion. Madame de Vannes laughed yet again as she saw.

'The little obstinate!' she murmured. 'It is not often that Alain throws pearls, or anything else away. And what a casket! Heavens! it is fit for a wedding gift to a queen. Is it possible that Othmar——? No, it is not possible; he would never think of a child like that. Perhaps he did it to rouse Nadine. What a cunning little pole-cat these nuns have sent me!'

But a kind of respect awakened in her towards her young

cousin. A girl who could charm Alain de Vannes and Othmar was not to be dismissed scornfully as a novice and a baby. The Duchesse drew some note-paper to her, and wrote a little letter to her neighbour, in which she expressed herself very admirably, with dignity and grace, as the guardian of a motherless child who was dedicated to the service of Heaven. She suggested, without actually saying so, that he had failed in reverence towards Heaven, and towards the Maison de Vannes and the Maison de Creusac, in permitting himself to offer gifts to Mdlle. de Valogne; she recalled to him, without any positive expression of the sort, that a young girl of noble descent could not be approached with gifts as a young actress might be, and that if any had been offered they should have, at least, been offered through herself.

She was honestly irritated with Othmar for having thus been wanting, as she considered, in full respect for those great families from which Yseulte de Valogne had sprung. She was excessively angry with her children's governesses, whose negligence had rendered it possible for the girl to wander about alone, and she gave them a short but very terrible audience in her dressing-room; yet, on the whole, the affair amused her a little, and the high-breeding in her made her do justice to the honour which had forced her young cousin to tell unasked all the truth.

Later on she had a little scene with her husband, half comic, half tragic, in which they flung the *tu quoque* liberally one at the other, apropos of many vagaries less innocent than his fancy for Yseulte de Valogne; but she did not tell him about Othmar's casket, for she reasoned, with admirable knowledge of men's natures, that they cared so much more if they thought anyone else cared too.

Meanwhile, Yseulte, having given the casket into the hands of the maid without a word or sign of regret, locked herself in, threw herself on her bed, and sobbed as piteously as though the magic box had been that of Pandora, and bore all hope away within it.

CHAPTER XVI.

NADINE NAPRAXINE kept her promise to Othmar. She did for him what she had done for no other human being; she meditated on his entreaties as a thing which might possibly be granted by her. She looked for a little while through the play and the glow of his impassioned words as through some painted window into some agreeable land whither, perchance, she might travel.

The very sternness and daring of his manner of demand had its attraction for her. None of her courtiers had wooed her quite in that way: some had been too timid, some too submissive, some

too worldly-wise. The insane desire to fly with her from the world to some far-away, semi-barbaric, mysterious Eden of his own making had never been so boldly and uncompromisingly set forth to her by any lover as now by Othmar. It had a certain fascination for her even while the philosophy and irony in her ridiculed the idea. It responded to the vague but very real dissatisfaction with which life, as it was, filled her. She was tired of the routine of it. Everyone said the same thing. Its very triumphs were so monotonous that they might just as well have been failures. Half her provocation and cruelty to men arose from a wish which she could not resist, to find something vivid and new to interest her. She succeeded in causing tragedies, but she did not succeed in being interested in them herself.

Othmar did interest her—in a measure.

He had done so from the first moment that she saw him coming in—tall, slight, grave, with great repose and more dignity than most men of his day—through the vague light, *entre chien et loup*, into the hall of a country house in the green heart of the Ardennes, where she and her hosts and a great party, wearing the russet and gold and pale blue of their hunting clothes, were waiting for the signal of the *curée* from the terraces without.

He had interested her then and always in a degree; but only in a degree.

'It certainly cannot be love that *I* feel,' she said to herself, with regret. 'I am glad when he comes because he—almost—excites me, but I am glad when he is gone because he—almost—disturbs me. I can imagine certain follies being possible to me when he is here, but they never quite become possible. If I were sure they would become so, and in becoming so be agreeable to me, I would go away with him. But—but—but——'

The objections seemed many to her, in a way insuperable; they lay in herself, not in him, and so appeared never to be removed.

She respected him because he would have scorned one of those intrigues screened under conventional observances, of which the world is so full. If she could have entirely persuaded herself that his life was absolutely necessary to hers, she would not have hesitated to let society become aware of the truth. She had no grain in her of the hypocrite or of the coward.

But she was not sure: and to break up your life irrevocably, to throw it into a furnace and fuse it into a wholly new shape, to fling your name to all the hounds who fed on the offal of calumny, and then to find, after all this *Sturm und Drang*, that you had only made a mistake, and were only a little more bored than before!—this possibility seemed to be at once so dreary and so ridiculous that she did not dare to put it to the proof. Her own potential weariness in the future to which he wooed her, rose before her in a ghastly shape and barred the way.

She pondered on the matter fully and sincerely for some days: days in which nothing pleased her: days in which her riding-horse felt her spurs, and her friends her sarcasms: days in which her toilettes had little power to interest her; Worth himself seemed worn out; her admirable tire-woman did nothing well; and her husband seemed to her to have grown heavier, stouter, stupider, more Kalmuck, and more intolerable than ever during the hours of breakfast and dinner, which were the only hours weighted by his presence. In those few hours she felt almost persuaded to take her lover at his word. Platon Napraxine was so densely, so idiotically, so provocatively unalarmed and secure! He would have tempted almost any woman to make him suddenly awake to find himself ridiculous.

'He would howl like a wounded bear!' she thought contemptuously, 'and then somebody would bring him brandy, and somebody would mention the tables, and somebody would talk about Mdlle. Chose, and he would be all right again. He is too stupid to feel. There are prairie dogs, they say, which hardly know when they are shot or beaten; he has got the soul of one of them. Because I have married him he is convinced that I shall never leave him;—*la belle raison*! There are so many men like that. They marry just as they buy a cane; they put the cane in the stand; it is bought and it cannot move; they are sure it will always be there. One fine day some one comes and takes it; then they stare and they swear because they have been robbed.'

This time of uncertainty and doubt, which was to Othmar fraught with such wild alternations of hope and of fear, which now swung him in his fancy high as heaven and now sunk him deep in the darkness of despair, was to her a period rather of the most minute analysis and of the most subtle self-examination. In the *naïveté* of her profound and unconscious egotism she never once considered his loss or gain: she was entirely occupied with the consideration of her own wishes. Everything bored her; would she, if she took this step, which to most women would have looked so big with fate, be less bored—or more? This seemed to her the one momentous issue which trembled uncertain at the gate of choice.

She considered it thoughtfully and dispassionately. She was not troubled by any moral doubts, or any such reasons for hesitation as would have beset many women of more prejudices and of less intelligence than herself. All these things were *le vieux jeu*. She was far too clear-sighted and too highly-cultured to be scared by such bogies as frighten narrow minds. She saw no sanctity whatever in the marriage ties which bound her to Platon Napraxine. You might as well talk of a contract for eggs and butter, or an operation on the Bourse, being sacred! No human ordinances can very well be sacred, and we cannot be sure there are any divine ones, logically, all the probabilities are that there are none;

so she certainly would have said had anyone challenged her views on such a subject.

In a manner, this crisis of her life amused her like a comedy. The unconsciousness of her husband whilst the unseen cords of destiny were tightening about him; the revolt and impatience of Othmar, conveyed to her by many a restless glance and half-uttered word as they passed each other in his drawing-rooms or in those of others; the ignorance of her lovers and her friends; and her own meditations as to the many comments that the world would make if ever it knew: all these diverted her.

What alone troubled her was her own pride. Would she ever be able to endure any loss of that? '*Je serai honnête femme*,' she had said to her father in her childhood, and when she had repeated the words in her womanhood her mind had been made up not so much by coldness, chastity, or delicacy as by hauteur. She could not have endured to feel that there were any doors in Europe which could be shut in her face, or that she could not shut her own whensoever and against whomsoever she might choose.

His term of probation came to an end one morning when the day had nothing of winter save its date; a morning rosy and golden, with distant mists transparent as a veil, and the mild air soundless and windless amongst the mimosa and eucalyptus groves of the grounds of La Jacquemerille. For once Nadine Napraxine condescended to be true to an appointment; whilst the day was still young and all the lazy world of the modern Baiæ still dozed or, at the utmost, yawned itself awake, she moved, with that lovely languor which was as much a portion of her as the breath she drew, along the sea-terrace of her house, and smiled to see Othmar already standing at the foot of the sea-steps.

'What children men are!' she thought, with that ridicule which the ardour of her lovers was always most apt to awake in her, as he bent over her hand and pressed on it lips which trembled.

'It must be really delightful,' she continued in her own reflections, 'to be able to be so very eager and so very much in earnest about anything. Instead of abusing us, men ought to be infinitely thankful to us for giving them emotions which do, for the time at least, eclipse those of baccarat and of pigeon-shooting. In a moment or two he will be inclined to hate me, but he will be very wrong. He will always be my debtor for fifteen days of the most exquisite agitation of his life. Twenty years hence he will look back to this time, and say, "*Oh, le beau temps quand j'étais si malheureux*!"'

Whilst she so mused she was saying little careless, easy phrases to him, pacing her terrace slowly, with her great mantle of iris-coloured plush, lined with silver-fox fur, drawn close about her, and its hood about her face, like its spathe around the narcissus. She was serene, affable, nonchalant; he was silent, and deeply

agitated; so passionately eager for his fate to be spoken, that he could find no light sentences with which to answer hers.

'He looks very well in that kind of excitement,' she thought, as she glanced sideways at him. 'He is poetic in it, instead of being only awkward, like poor Ralph. Really, if one could only be sure of one's self——'

She amused herself awhile by keeping him upon the terrace, on which all the windows of the house looked, and where regard for her must perforce restrain him from any betrayal of his own emotions. She felt as if she held in leash some panting, striving, desert animal which she forced to preserve the measured pace and decorous stillness of tamed creatures.

At length, compassion or prudence made her relent, and enter the little oriental room where his eloquent avowals had been made a fortnight before. She closed the glass doors, threw off her furs, and stood in the subdued light and the heated air of the room, cool, pale, delicate as the April flower which she resembled, long trailing folds of the primrose-coloured satin which formed her morning *négligé* falling from her throat to her feet in the long lines that painters love; one great pearl fastened a few sprays of stephanotis at her throat. She sank into a chair which stood against a tree of scarlet azalea set in an antique vase of brass. She was one of those women who naturally make pictures of themselves for every act and in every attitude.

The moment they were secure from observation Othmar knelt at her feet and kissed her hands again; his eyes, uplifted, told their tale of rapture, hope, fear, and imploring prayer more passionately than any words. He would have cut his heart out of his breast if she had bidden him.

She glanced down on the agitation which his features could not conceal with a sense of that wonder which never failed to come to her before the intensity of feeling with which she inspired others.

'When I really do nothing to make them like that!' she reflected for the hundredth time before the tempest which she raised almost without endeavour.

Othmar had recovered his presence of mind, though none of his tranquillity; his words, impetuous, persuasive, at times broken by the force of his emotion, at times eloquent with the eloquence natural to passion, fell on her ear uninterrupted by her. She listened, much as she might have listened to the sonorous swell of the *Marche au Supplice* of Berlioz, or any other harmony which should have pleased her taste if only by contrast of its own vehemence and strength with the serenity of her own nature. She listened, without any sign of any sort, save of so much acquiescence as might be indicated by the gentleness of her expression and the passiveness with which she left her hand in his. He believed her silence to be assent.

'This is what I have always fancied might conquer me,' she thought, whilst his ardent protestations and entreaties held her for the moment pleased and fascinated. 'And yet, I do not know. To leave the world, to be always together, to go, Heaven knows where, into a sort of Mahometan paradise—would it suit me? I am afraid not. The idea pleases one in a way, but not quite enough for that. Always together, and alone—one would tire of an angel!'

So still she was, as these thoughts drifted through her mind, so unresistingly she let his forehead, and then his lips, lie on her hand, that he believed himself successful in his prayer. He lifted his eyes and looked at her with a gaze full of rapturous light, of adoration and of gratitude.

'Oh, my love! my love!' he murmured. 'Never shall you regret an hour your mercy to me!'

His lips would have sought hers as his words ended in a sigh, the lover's sigh of happiness, but she moved and disengaged herself quickly, and motioned to him to rise. On her mouth there was the slight smile he knew so well—the smile that was the enemy of men.

'My dear friend,' she said, in her melodious voice, sweet as the south wind, and never sweeter than when it uttered cruel truths to ears that were wounded by them, 'I will do you the justice to grant that I quite believe you care very much for me' (he made an indignant gesture); 'well, that you love me *un peu, beaucoup, passionnément*, as the convent girls say to the daisies. But I am equally convinced that you do not understand me in the least. I understand myself thoroughly. We are all enigmas to others, but we ought to be able to read our own riddle ourselves. I can read mine; many people never can read theirs all their lives long, and that is why they make so many mistakes. Now, I do know myself so very well. I know that no kind of sin, if there really be such a thing as sin, would frighten me much. I think my nerves would stand even a crime without wincing, if it were a bold one. If the world threw stones at me, it would amuse me. I cannot fancy anybody being unhappy about it. Therefore you will comprehend me when I say that it is not any kind of commonplace nonsense about doing anything wrong which moves me for a moment, but—I have thought of it all very much and very seriously, and really with a wish to try that other kind of life you speak of, but—I cannot go with you!'

She said it as quietly and as lightly as if she were saying that she could not drive with him to the Col di Guardia that morning. She was smiling her pretty, slight, mysterious smile, which might have meant anything, from pity to derision. She had a sprig or two of the leafless calycanthus in her fingers, which she played with as she spoke. He hated the fragrance of that winter blossom ever afterwards.

'You cannot? You cannot?' he murmured almost unconsciously. 'And why?'

He did not well know what he said, the paralysis of a sudden and intense disappointment was upon him; he forgot that he had no right to interrogate her, that no faintest breath of promise from her had ever given him title to upbraid her; the noise as of a million waves of stormy seas was surging in his ears.

'Why?' she repeated, with the same serenity, and with a kind of indulgence as to a wayward, imperious child. 'Oh, for so many reasons!—not at all, believe me, from any kind of hesitation about Platon; he would do very well without me, though he would try to kill you, I suppose, because men have such odd ideas; besides they are always fretting about what the world thinks, just as when they play billiards they think about the opinion of the *galerie*; no, not for that, believe me; that is not my kind of feeling at all; but I have thought over it all very much, and I have decided that it would not do—for me. I should be irritable and unhappy in a false position, because I should have lost the power to shut my doors, other people would shut theirs instead; I should be quite miserable if I could not be disagreeable to persons whom I did not care to know, and no one in a false position ever dares be that; they smile, poor creatures, perpetually, like so many wax dolls from Giroux's. Of course the moral people say it is the loss of self-respect which makes them so anxious to please, but it is not that: it is really the sense that it is of no use for them to be rude any more, because their rudeness cannot vex anybody. I quite understand Marie Antoinette; I should not mind the scaffold in the least, but I should dislike going in the cart. "*Le roi avait une charrette*," you remember.'

Othmar had risen; as she glanced up at him, even over her calm and courageous temperament, a little chill passed that was almost one of alarm. Yet her sense of pleasure was keener than her fear: men's souls were the chosen instrument on which she chose to play; if here she struck some deeper chords than usual, the melody gained for her ear. Profound emotions and eager passions were unknown to her in her own person, but they constituted a spectacle which diverted her if it did not weary her—the chances depended upon her mood. At this moment they pleased her; pleased her the more for that thrill of alarm, which was so new to her nerves.

Othmar did not speak: all the strength which was in him was taxed to its breaking point in the effort to restrain the passionate reproaches and entreaties which sprang to his lips, the burning tears of bitter disillusion and cruel disappointment which rushed to his sight and oppressed his breath. What a fool, what a madman, he had been again to throw down his heart like a naked, trembling, panting thing at her feet to be played with by her.

'How well he looks like that!' she thought. 'Most men grow

red when they are so angry, but he grows like marble, and his eyes burn—there are great tears in them—he looks like Mounet-Sully as Hippolytus.'

Once more the momentary inclination came over her to trust herself to that stormy force of love which might lead to shipwreck and might lead to paradise; there were a beauty, a force, a fascination for her about him as he stood there in his silent rage, his eyes pouring down on her the lightnings of his reproach; but the impulse was not strong enough to conquer her; the world she would have given up with contemptuous indifference, but she would not surrender her own power to dictate to the world.

Her soft tranquil voice went on, as a waterfall may gently murmur its silvery song while a tempest shakes the skies.

'I know you think that love is enough, but I assure you I should doubt it, even if I did—love you. Rousseau has said long before us that love lacks two things—permanence and immutability; they seem to me synonymous, and I do not think that their absence is a defect; I think it even a merit. Yet, as they *are* absent, it cannot be worth while to pay so very much for so very defective a thing.'

'God forgive you!' cried her lover in passionate pain. 'You betray me with the cruelest jest that woman ever played off on man, and you think that I can stand still to hearken to the pretty tinkling bells of a drawing-room philosophy!'

'You do not stand still,' she answered languidly, 'you walk to and fro like a wounded panther in a cage. I have in no way betrayed you, and I am not jesting at all. I am saying the very simplest truth. You have asked me to do a momentous and irrevocable thing; and I have answered you truthfully that I should not shrink from it if I were convinced that I should never regret it. But I am not convinced——'

'If you loved me you would be so!' he said in a voice which was choked and almost inaudible.

'Ah!—if!' said Nadine Napraxine with a smile and a little sigh. 'The whole secret lies in that one conjunction!'

His teeth clenched as he heard her as if in the intolerable pain of some mortal wound.

'Besides, besides,' she murmured, half to herself and half to him, 'my dear Othmar, you are charming. You are like no one else; you please me; I confess that you please me, but you could not insure me against my own unfortunate capacity for very soon tiring of everybody, and—I have a conviction that in three months' time *I should be tired of you*!'

A strong shudder passed over him from head to foot, as the words struck him with a greater shock than the blow of a dagger in his side would have given. He realised the bottomless gulf which separated him from the woman he adored—the chasm of her own absolute indifference.

He, in his exaltation, was ready to give up all his future and

fling away all his honour for her sake, and would have asked nothing more of earth and heaven than to have passed life and eternity at her feet; and she, swayed momentarily towards him by a faint impulse of the senses and the sensibilities, yet could draw back and calmly look outward into that vision of the possible future, which dazzled him as the mirage blinds and mocks the desert-pilgrim dying of thirst; she, with chill prescience could foresee the time when his presence would become to her a weariness, a chain, a yoke-fellow tiresome and dull!

She looked at him with a momentary compassion.

'Dear Othmar, I am quite sure you have meant all you said,' she murmured softly. 'But, believe me, it would not do; it would not do for you and me, if it might for some people. I am not in the least shocked. I think your idea quite beautiful, like a poem; but I am certain it would never suit myself. I tire of everything so quickly, and then you know I am not in love with *you*. One wants to be so much in love to do that sort of thing, we should bore one another so infinitely after the first week. Yes, I am sure we should, though I know you are quite sincere in saying you would like it.'

Then, still with that demure, satisfied, amused smile, she turned away and lifted up the Moorish chocolate pot and poured out a little chocolate into her cup.

'It has grown cold,' she said, and tinkled a hand-bell which was on the tray to summon Mahmoud.

Othmar, who had sprung to his feet and stood erect, seized her wrist in his fingers and threw the bell aside.

'There is no need to dismiss me,' he said in a low tone. 'Adieu! You can tell the story to Lord Geraldine.'

His face was quite colourless, except that around his forehead there was a dusky red mark where the blood had surged and settled as though he had been struck there with a whip.

He bowed low, and left her.

She stood before the Moorish tray and its contents with a sense of cold at her heart, but her little self-satisfied smile was still on her mouth.

'He will come back,' she thought. 'He came back before; they always come back.'

She did not intend to go with him to Asia, but she did not, either, intend to lose him altogether.

'He was superb in his fury and his grief,' she thought, 'and he meant every word of it, and he would do all that he said, more than he said. Perhaps it hurt him too much, perhaps I laughed a little too soon.'

She was like the child who had found its living bird the best of all playthings, but had forgotten that its plaything, being alive, could also die, and so had nipped the new toy too cruelly in careless little fingers, and had killed it.

CHAPTER XVII.

OTHMAR, as he left La Jacquemerille, forgot the boat in which he had come thither. He walked mechanically through the house, and out by the first gate which he saw before him. He was in that state of febrile excitation in which the limbs move without the will in an instinctive effort to find outlet to mental pain in bodily exertion. The gate he had passed through opened into a little wood of pines, whence a narrow path led upward into the hills above. With little consciousness of what he did, he ascended the mule-road which rose before him, and the chill of the morning air, as it blew through the tops of the swaying pines, was welcome to him. He had that cruel wound within him which a proud man suffers from when he has disclosed the innermost secrets of his heart in a rare moment of impulse, and has seen them lightly and contemptuously played with for a jest.

He had gone through life receiving much adulation but little sympathy, and giving as little confidence; in a moral isolation due to the delicacy of his own nature and to the flattery he received, which had early made him withhold himself from intimate friendships, fearing to trust where he would be only duped.

To her, in an unguarded hour, he had shown the loneliness and the longing which he felt, he had disclosed the empty place which no powers or vanities of the world could fill; he had staked the whole of his peace on the caprice of one woman, and he knew that, in the rough phrase which men would have used to him, he had been made a fool of in return; he had betrayed himself, and had nothing in return but the memory of a little low laughter, of a tranquil voice, saying: '*Tout cela c'est le vieux jeu*!'

He never knew very well how that day of the 2nd of January passed with him. He was sensible of walking long, of climbing steep paths going towards the higher mountains, of drinking thirstily at a little woodland fountain, of sitting for hours quite motionless, looking down on the shore far below, where the blue sea spread in the sunlight, and the towers of S. Pharamond were mere grey points amidst a crowd of evergreen and of silvery-leafed trees.

There was an irony in the sense that he could have purchased the whole province which lay beneath his feet, could have bought out the princeling who reigned in that little kingdom under old Turbia, as easily as he could have bought a bouquet for a woman, could have set emperors to war with one another by merely casting his gold into the scales of peace, could have created a city in a barren plain with as little effort as a child builds up a toy village on a table, and yet was powerless to command, or to

arouse, the only thing on earth which he desired, one whit of feeling in the woman he loved!

It was late in the afternoon when he took his way homeward, having eaten nothing, only drunk thirstily of water wherever a little brook had made a well amongst the tufts of hepatica in the pine woods. He was a man capable of a spiritual love; if she had remained aloof from him for honour's sake, but had cared for him, he would not have demurred to her choice, but would have accepted his fate at her hands, and would have served her loyally with the devotion of a chivalrous nature.

All the passion, the pain, as of a boy's first love, blent in him with the bitter revolts of mature manhood. He believed that Nadine Napraxine had never intended more than to amuse herself with his rejection; he believed that for the second time he had been the toy of an unscrupulous coquette. Whatever fault there might be in his love for her, it was love—absolute, strong, faithful, and capable of an eternal loyalty; he had laid his heart bare before her, and had meant in their utmost meaning all the words which he had uttered, all the offers which he had made. Despite his knowledge of her, he had allowed himself to be beguiled into a second confession of the empire she possessed over him, and for the second time he had been not alone rejected, but gently ridiculed with that quiet amused irony which had been to the force and heat of his passion like a fine spray of ice-cold water falling on iron at a white-heat. She had not alone wounded and stung him: she had humiliated him profoundly. If she had rejected him from honour, duty, or love for any other, he would have borne what men have borne a thousand times in silence, and with no sense of shame; but he was conscious that in her absolute indifference she had drawn him on to the fullest revelation of all he felt for her, only that her ready satire might find food in his folly, and her fine wit play with his suffering, as the angler plays the trout. She seemed to him to have betrayed him in the basest manner that a woman could betray a man who had no positive right to her loyalty. She had known so well how he loved her. He had told her so many times; unless she had been willing to hear the tale again, why had she bidden him come there in that charmed solitude in the hush and freshness of the early morning? When women desire not love, do they seat their lover beside them when all the world sleeps? He had been cheated, laughed at, summoned, and then dismissed; his whole frame thrilled with humiliation when he recalled the smiling subdued mockery of her voice as she had dismissed him.

He had been willing to give her his life, his good repute, his peace, his honour, his very soul; and she had sent him away with the calm, cool, little phrases with which she would have rejected a clumsy valser for a cotillon!

He had little vanity, but he knew himself to be one of those

to whom the world cringes; one of those of whom modern life has made its Cæsars; he knew that what he had been willing to surrender to her had been no little thing; that he would have said farewell to the whole of mankind for her sake, and would have loved her with the romantic devoted force and fealty of a franker and fiercer time than his own; and she had drawn him on to again confess this, again offer this, and all it had seemed to her was *vieux jeu*, an archaic thing to laugh at, to yawn at, to be indulgent to, and tired by, in a breath!

He was a very proud man, and a man who had seldom or never shown what he either desired or suffered, yet he had laid his whole heart bare to her; and she, the only living being who had either power over him, or real knowledge of him, had looked at him with her little cool smile, and said, 'In three months I should be tired of you.'

If, when the knight had killed his falcon for his lady, she had scoffed at it and thrown it out to feed the rats and sparrows he would have suffered as Othmar suffered now. He had killed his honour and his pride for her sake, and she had held them in her hands for a moment, and then had laughed a little and had thrown them away.

Where he sat all alone he felt his cheeks burn with the sense of an unendurable mortification. At this moment, for aught he knew, she, with her admirable mimicry and her merciless sarcasm, might be reacting the scene for the diversion of her companions! Passion was but *vieux jeu*; it could expect no higher distinction than to be ridiculed as comedy by a witty woman. Did not the universe only exist to amuse the languor of Nadine Napraxine?

The world, had it heard the story, would have blamed him for an unholy love, and praised her for her dismissal of it; but he knew that he had been as utterly betrayed as though he had been sold by her into the hands of assassins. She had drawn him on, and on, and on, until all his life had been laid at her feet, and then she had looked at it a little, carelessly, idly, and had said she had no use for it, as she might have said of any sea-waste washed up on the sea-steps of her terrace with that noon.

Of course the world would have praised her; no doubt the world would have blamed him; but he knew that women who slay their lovers after loving them do a coarser but a kinder thing.

It was almost dark as he descended the road to S. Pharamond, intending when he reached home to make some excuse to his uncle and leave for Paris by the night express or by a special train. The path he took led through the orange-wood of Sandroz, which fitted, in a triangular-shaped piece of ground, between the boundaries of his own land and that of Millo. Absorbed as he was in his own thoughts, he recognised with surprise the figure of Yseulte as he pushed his way under the low boughs of the orange trees, and saw her within a yard of him. She was with the woman Nicole.

She did not see him until he was close to her, where she sat on a low stone wall, the woman standing in front of her. When she did so, her face spoke for her; it said what Nadine Napraxine's had never said. The emotion of joy and timidity mingled touched him keenly in that moment, when he, with his millions of gold and of friends, had so strongly realised his own loneliness.

'*She* loves me as much as she dare—as much as she can, without being conscious of it,' he thought, as he paused beside her. She did not speak, she did not move; but her colour changed and her breath came quickly. She had slipped off the wall and stood irresolute, as though inclined to run away, the glossy leaves and the starry blossoms of the trees consecrated to virginity were all above her and around her. She glanced at him with an indefinite fear; she fancied he was angered by the return of the casket; he looked paler and sterner than she had ever seen him look.

He paused a moment and said some commonplace word.

Then he saw that her eyes were wet with tears, and that she had been crying.

'What is the matter?' he said, gently. 'Has anything vexed you?'

'They are sending her away,' said Nicole Sandroz, with indignant tears in her own eyes, finding that she did not reply for herself. 'They are sending her to the Vosges, where, as Monsieur knows very well, I make no doubt, the very hares and wolves are frozen in the woods at this month of the year.'

'Are you indeed going away?' he asked of Yseulte herself.

She did not speak: she made a little affirmative gesture.

'Why is that? Bois le Roy, in this season, will be a cruel prison for you.'

'My cousin wishes it,' said the girl. She spoke with effort; she did not wish to cry before him; the memory of all that her cousin had said that morning was with her in merciless distinctness.

Nicole broke out in a torrent of speech, accusing the tyrants o Millo in impassioned and immoderate language, and devoting them and theirs to untold miseries in retribution.

Yseulte stopped her with authority: 'You are wrong, Nicole; do not speak in such a manner, it is insolent. You forget that, whether I am in the Vosges or here, I equally owe my cousin everything.'

She paused; she was no more than a child. Her departure was very cruel to her; she had been humiliated and chastised that day beyond her power of patience; she had said nothing, done nothing, but in her heart she had rebelled passionately when they had taken away her ivory casket. They had left her the heart of a woman in its stead.

Othmar was ignorant that his casket, fateful as Pandora's, had been returned, but he divined that his gift had displeased those

who disposed of her destiny, and had brought about directly or indirectly her exile from Millo.

'When do you go?' he asked abruptly.

'To-morrow.'

As she answered him the tears she could not altogether restrain rolled off her lashes. She turned away.

'Let us go in, Nicole,' she murmured. 'You know Henriette is waiting for me.'

'Let her wait, the cockered-up Parisienne, who shrieks if she see a pig and has hysterics if she get a spot of mud on her stockings!' grumbled Nicole, who was the sworn foe of the whole Paris-born and Paris-bred household of Millo. But Yseulte had already moved towards the house. When she had gone a few yards away, however, she paused, returned, and approached Othmar. She looked on the ground, and her voice trembled as she spoke: 'I ought to thank you, M. Othmar—I do thank you. It was very beautiful. I would have kept it all my life.'

'Ah!' said Othmar.

He understood; he was moved to a sudden anger, which penetrated even his intense preoccupation. He had meant to do this poor child a kindness, and he had only done her great harm.

Yseulte had turned away, and had gone rapidly through the orange-trees towards the house.

'She is not happy?' said Othmar to her foster-mother, whose tongue, once loosed, told him with the eloquence of indignation of all the sorrows suffered by her nursling. 'And they will make her a nun, Monsieur!' she cried; 'a nun! That child, who is like a June lily. For me, I say nothing against the black and grey women, though Sandroz calls them bad names. There are good women amongst them, and when one lies sick in hospital one is glad of them; but there are women enough in this world who have sins and shame to repent them of to fill all the convents from here to Jerusalem. There are all the ugly ones too, and the sickly ones and the deformed ones, and the heart-broken; for them it is all very well; the cloister is home, the veil is peace—they must think of heaven, or go mad; it is best they should think of it. But this child to be a nun!—when she should be running with her own children through the daisies—when she should be playing in the sunshine like the lambs, like the kids, like the pigeons!'

Othmar heard her to the end; then without answer he bade her good-day, and descended the sloping grass towards his house.

'They say he has a million a year,' said Nicole to herself, as she looked after him. 'Well, he does not seem to be happy upon it. The lads that bring up the rags on their heads from the ships look gayer than he, all in the stench and the muck as they are, and never knowing that they will earn their bread and wine from one day to another.'

She kicked a stone from her path, and hurried after her nursling.

Othmar went quickly on to his own woods. 'They could not even let her have that toy,' he thought with an emotion, vague but sincere, outside the conflict of passion, wrath, and mortification which Nadine Napraxine had aroused in him. He saw the sudden happiness, so soon veiled beneath reserve and timidity, which had shone on the girl's face as she had first seen him under the orange boughs. He saw her beautiful golden eyes misty with the tears she had had too much courage to shed; he saw her slender throat swell with subdued emotion as she had approached him and said shyly, 'I would have kept it all my life.'

All her life—in the stone cell of some house of the Daughters of Christ or the Sisters of St. Marie!

'To love is more, yet to be loved is something,'

he thought. 'What treasures for one's heart and senses are in her—if one could only care!'

CHAPTER XVIII.

When he reached home that evening he found on his writing-table the ivory casket and the letter of Madame de Vannes. In the pain and the passion which wrestled together against his manhood in him, he scarcely heeded either, yet they brought before his memory the face of Yseulte, and the sound of her soft grave voice with that sweet thrill of youth in it which is like the thrill of the thrush's in the woods at spring-time. She had youth, but she would have no spring-time.

And in the strong and impotent rage which consumed him, in the pain of bruised and aching nerves, and the sickening void which the certain loss of what alone is loved brings with it, Othmar, seeing the ivory casket, and glancing at the letter which he had had no patience to read through, thought to himself, 'The child loves me; she will have a wretched life; what if I try to forget? They threw virgins to the Minotaur. Shall I try to appease with one this cruel fire of love, which leaves me no peace or wisdom?'

It was the act of a madman to attempt to make one woman take the place of another to the senses or to the heart, but in that moment he was not master of himself. He was only sensible of a cruel insult which he had received from the hand he loved best on earth: of a cruel betrayal which was but the more merciless because wrought with so sweet a smile, so apparent an unconsciousness, so seemingly innocent a malice.

He passed the night and the next morning locked in his own room; when he left it, and met the Baron Friederich, he said to him:

'I have thought over all you said the other day. You are right, no doubt. Will you go across to our neighbours at Millo and ask of them the honour of the hand of their cousin, of Mademoiselle de Valogne?'

The Baron stared at him with a little cry of amaze.

'For you?' he stammered.

'For me,' said Othmar. 'What have you said yourself? I do not want wealth; I want good blood, beauty, and innocence; they are all possessed by Mademoiselle de Valogne. Go! your errand will please them. They will pardon some breach of etiquette. It will be a mission which you will like.'

As the Baron, a little later, rolled through the gates of Millo in full state, his shrewd knowledge of men and their madnesses made him think:

'So the Princess Napraxine evidently will have nothing to say to him. *A la bonne heure*! There are some honest women left then amongst the great ladies. She could so easily have ruined him! He takes a droll way to cure himself, but it is not a bad one. The worst is, that this sort of cure never lasts long, and when she can make the unhappiness of two persons, instead of only the happiness of one, perhaps Madame la Princesse will be tempted to make it!'

CHAPTER XIX.

On the following day Platon Napraxine drove home from Monte Carlo at sunset with a piece of news to carry there which amused and unusually animated him.

He went up the stone stairs of the terrace of La Jacquemerille with the quick step of one who is eager to deliver himself of his tidings, and approached, with a rapidity unfrequent with him, the spot where his wife sat with her guests under the rose and white awning beside the marble balustrade and the variegated aloes.

The Princess Nadine was also full of unwonted animation; her cheek had its sea-shell flush, her eyes a vague and pleased expectancy; she was laughing a little and listening a good deal; besides her usual companions, she had there a group of Austrian and Russian diplomatists and some Parisian boulevardiers. They were just taking their leave as she was taking her tea, but it was not very greatly of them that she was thinking; she was thinking as she heard the roll of her husband's carriage wheels beneath the carouba trees: 'Ten to one Othmar will return with him.'

She lost her gay expression as she saw that he was alone.

All the day she had expected the man whom she had banished to return. She was accustomed to spaniels who crawled humbly up after a beating to solicit another beating rather than remain unnoticed. She had dismissed a certain apprehension which had told her that she had gone too far with the reflection that the man who loved her once did so for ever, and that, as he had returned from Asia, so he would return this morning, however great his offence or his humiliation might have been.

'He is more romantic than most,' she had thought, 'but after all, he must be made of the same stuff.'

Napraxine approached her hurriedly, and scarcely giving himself time to formally greet the gentlemen there, cried to her aloud:

'*Ecoutez donc, Madame!* You will never guess what has happened.'

'It is of no use for us to try then,' said his wife. 'You are evidently *gonflé* with some tremendous intelligence. Pray unburden yourself. Perhaps the societies for the protection of animals have had Strasburg *pâtés* made illegal?'

'I have seen the Duchesse, I have seen Baron Fritz, I have seen Melville,' answered her husband impetuously and triumphantly, 'and they all say the same thing, so that there cannot be a doubt that it is true. Othmar marries that little cousin of Cri-Cri: the one of whom they meant to make a nun. What luck for her! But they say she is very beautiful, and only sixteen.'

The people assembled around her table raised a chorus of exclamation and of comment. Napraxine stood amidst them, delighted; his little social bomb had burst with the brilliancy and the noise that he had anticipated.

Nadine Napraxine turned her head with an involuntary movement of surprise.

'Othmar!' she repeated; her large black eyes opened fully with a perplexed expression.

'It must be the girl who was in the boat,' said Lady Brancepeth. 'She was very handsome.'

Geraldine looked at Madame Napraxine with curiosity, eagerness, and gratification.

'Who told you, Platon?' she asked, with a certain impatience in her voice.

'Three of them told me; Meville first, then Cri-Cri herself, in the Salle de Jeu. She did not seem to know whether to be affronted or pleased. She said the whole thing was a great surprise, but that she could not refuse Othmar; she declared that her projects were all upset, that her young cousin had been always destined to the religious life; that she regretted to have her turned from her vocation; in short, she talked a great deal of nonsense, but the upshot of it all was that Baron Fritz had made formal proposals, and that she had accepted them. In the gardens, coming away, I met the Baron himself; he was in a state of ecstasy; all he cares

for is the perpetuation of the name of Othmar; but he declares that Mademoiselle de Valogne is everything he could desire, that she was excessively timid, and scarcely spoke a word when they allowed him to see her for five minutes, but that it was a very graceful timidity, and full of feeling.'

'Baron Fritz in the operatic *rôle* of Padrone d'Amore is infinitely droll,' said Nadine, with a little cold laugh.

'Of course Othmar was obliged to marry some time,' continued Napraxine, who did not easily abandon a subject when one pleased him. 'And he is—how old is he?—I saw the Baron as I left; he is delighted. He says the poor child fainted when they told her she was to be saved from a religious life.'

'My dear Platon,' said his wife impatiently, 'we can read Daudet or Henri Greville when we want this sort of thing. Pray, spare us. I hope Baron Fritz explained to her that all she is wanted for is to continue a race of Croatian money-lenders which he considers the pivot of the world. If she fail in doing that he will counsel a divorce, *à la* Bonaparte.'

'He might marry an archduchess,' said one of the diplomatists. 'Surely, it is throwing himself away.'

'It must be for love,' said Geraldine, with an ironical smile.

'The de Valogne was a great race, but impoverished long ago,' said a Russian minister. 'I think, if he had married at all, he should have made an alliance which would have brought him that unassailably great rank which is usually the ambition of all financiers. For a man of his position to make a mere romantic *mariage d'amour* is absurd—out of place;—and who knows if it be even that?' he pursued, with an involuntary glance at the Princess Napraxine.

'Why on earth should we doubt it?' said her husband. 'It cannot be anything else, and they say the girl is quite beautiful. Surely, if anyone can afford to marry to please himself, that one is Othmar.'

'At any rate, it is his own affair,' said Nadine, in a voice which was clear and sweet, but cold as steel. 'I cannot see why we should occupy ourselves about it, or why you should have announced it as if it were the dissolution of the world.'

'Mademoiselle de Valogne is very beautiful,' said Geraldine. 'I have seen her once at Millo. Why should they pretend to hesitate?'

'They hesitated because she is *vouée à Marie*,' replied Napraxine, 'and also the de Vannes and the de Creusac scarcely recognise the princes of finance as their equals. Still the marriage is magnificent; they felt they had no right to regret it since it fell to them from Heaven.'

'Do you still believe, Platon, that Heaven has anything to do with marriage?' said his wife, with her little significant smile; a slight colour had come upon her cheeks, tinging them as blush-

roses are tinged with the faintest flush; her eyes retained their astonished and annoyed expression, of which her husband saw nothing.

'Heaven made mine at least,' he said, with his unfailing good-humour, and a bow in which there was some grace.

'Louis Quatorze could not have answered better,' said Nadine. 'I cannot say I see the hand of Heaven myself in it, but if you do, so much the better. "Les illusions sont des zéros, mais c'est avec les zéros qu'on fait les beaux chiffres."'

'I do not know whether Mademoiselle de Valogne has illusions, but her settlements will certainly have *de beaux chiffres*,' continued Napraxine, who was still full of the tidings he had brought. 'Did Othmar say nothing to you the other morning of what he intended to do?'

'Nothing; why should he? I am no relation of his or of Mademoiselle de Valogne.'

'He might have done so; he was a long time alone with you. Perhaps he did not know it himself.'

'Perhaps not.'

'It seems a *coup de tête*. Madame de Vannes told me that he had only seen her cousin four times.'

'That is three times more than is necessary.'

'They say the girl is very much in love with him, and burst into tears when they told her of his proposals.'

'Oh, my dear Platon! That the girl marries Othmar one understands; she would be an imbecile, a lunatic, to refuse; but that she weeps because she will enjoy one of the hugest fortunes in Europe—do not make such demands on our credulity!'

'They say their acquaintance has been an idyl; quite *hors d'usage*; they both met in his gardens by chance, and he——'

'Chance? I thought it was Heaven? You may be quite sure neither had anything to do with it. Aurore is a very clever woman; she knew very well what she did when she brought her cousin down to Millo this winter; if the girl had been honestly *vouée à Marie*, would they have had her in the drawing-room after their dinner-parties? Ralph says he has seen her there.'

'Well, if it were a conspiracy, it has succeeded.'

'Of course it has succeeded. When women condescend to conspire, men always fall. Our Russian history will show you that.'

Being, however, an obstinate man, who always adhered to his own opinion, even in trifles which in no way concerned him, Napraxine reiterated that Baron Fritz had expressed himself satisfied that the girl was in love with his nephew.

'And why not?' he said stoutly, with more courage than he usually showed. 'Most women would soon care for Othmar if he wished them to do so.'

'Oh, *grand dada*!' murmured Nadine, in supreme disdain, whilst her eyes glanced over him for a moment with an expression

which, had he been wise enough to read it, would have made him less eager to extol the absent.

'After all,' she said aloud, 'what is his marriage to us, that we should talk about it? I suppose it is the sole act of his life which would have no effect on the Bourses. We get into very base habits of discussing our neighbours' affairs. Let us say, once for all, that he has done a very charitable action, and that we hope it will have a happy result: *e basta!* We will call at Millo to-morrow. I am curious to see the future Countess Othmar.

'They say she is very shy.'

'Oh, we all know Ste. Mousseline,' said Nadine Napraxine, with scorn. 'Besides, convent-reared girls are all of the same type. I only hope Cri-Cri will not assume any hypocritical airs of regret before me; the only regret she can really have is that Blanchette was not old enough to have won this matrimonial Derby.'

'You always speak so slightingly of Othmar,' said Napraxine, with some reproach.

'I really thought I paid him a high compliment,' said his wife.

'Why has he done it?' said one of the Russian diplomatists to another, when they had taken leave of the Princess and her party.

'I imagine that Madame Napraxine piqued him,' said another. 'You know he has been madly in love with her for two years.'

'She does not seem to like his marriage.'

'They never like it,' returned the Russian minister. 'They may not look at you themselves, but they never like you to look at anyone else.'

'If he marry her because he is in love elsewhere, and if she have the Princess Nadine for an enemy at the onset, this poor child's path will not be of roses.'

'She will be almost the richest woman in Europe; that must suffice.'

'That will depend on her character.'

'It will depend a little on whether she will be in love with her husband. If she be not, all may go smoothly.'

'Do you know what I thought as I looked at Madame Napraxine just now?' said the younger man. 'I thought of that Persian or Indian tale where the woman, leaning over the magic cup, dropped a pearl from her necklace into it, and spoilt the whole charm for all eternity. I dare say it will be only a pearl which she will drop into Othmar's future life, but it will spoil the whole charm of it for ever and ever.'

'You never liked her,' said the elder man. 'She is a woman capable of an infinitude of things, good and bad. She has the misfortune to have a very excellent and very stupid husband. There is nothing so injurious for a clever woman. A bad man who had ill-treated her would not have done her half as much harm.

She would have had courage and energy to meet an unhappy fate superbly. But a perfectly amiable fool whom she disdains from all the height of her own admirable wit, coupled with the habits of our idiotic world, which is like a mountain of wool steeped in opium, into which the strongest sinks indolent and enfeebled, have all tended to confirm her in her egotism and her disdain, and to send to sleep all her more noble impulses. Whatever men may be, women can only be "saved by faith," and what faith has Nadine Napraxine except her perfect faith in her own irresistible and incomparable power over her innumerable lovers?'

'Well,' said the younger man, 'if she chose to drop that pearl in, as I said, I would not give much for the chances of Othmar's wife against her. I have seen the girl. She is very lovely, serious, simple; no match at all against such a woman as Princess Napraxine.'

'She will have the advantage of youth, and also—which, perhaps, will count for something with such a man as Othmar, though it would not with most men—she will be his wife.'

'Perhaps. He has been always eccentric,' rejoined the other.

Watching her with all the keen anxiety of jealousy Geraldine had been unable to discover that the intelligence of Othmar's marriage caused her any more surprise or interest than any other of the hundred and one items of news which make up the daily pabulum of society. But then he knew very well that she was of such a character that though she might have suffered intolerably she would have shown no sign of it any more than she would have shown any fear had a dozen naked sabres been at her breast.

Left alone beside his sister for a moment, he said to her, with doubting impatience: 'Does she care, do you think?'

'What affair is it of yours if she does?' returned Lady Brancepeth. 'Does she ever care for anything? And why should she care here? Othmar has been known to be violently in love with her—as you are—but no one has ever had the slightest reason to suppose that she had any feeling in return for him. He does a foolish thing in marrying one woman while he loves another. Some men have faith in that cure. Myself I should have none. But whatever his reasons for this sudden choice of Mdlle. de Valogne, I imagine that his marriage is a matter of as perfect indifference to Nadine as your own would be.'

Geraldine grew red, and his mortification kept him silent. But the insight of a man in love told him that his keen-eyed sister was for once in error.

Nadine Napraxine herself had gone to her own rooms to change her gown for dinner, but she dismissed her maids for twenty minutes and threw herself on a couch in her bedroom. She was herself uncertain what she felt, and angered that she should feel anything. She was conscious of a sense of offence, irritation, amazement, almost chagrin, which hurt her pride and alarmed her

dignity. If a month before she had been told that Othmar was dead, she would have felt no more than a momentary regret. But the strength of his passion in the morning interviews with her had touched some fibre, some nerve in her, which had been dumb and numb before. Again and again she had recalled the accents of his voice, the sombre fire and pathetic entreaty of his eyes; they had not moved her at the time to anything more than the vague artistic pleasure which she would have taken in any emotion admirably rendered in art or on the stage, but in remembrance they had haunted her and thrilled through her with something more nearly resembling response than had ever been aroused in her.

The expectation of his return had been as strong as certainty; the sense that she had gone too far with him had heightened the interest with which she had awaited her next meeting with him. One of the greatest triumphs of her fascination had been the power she had exercised over him. She was the only living person who could say to this man, who could have purchased souls and bodies as he could have purchased strings of unpierced pearls if he had chosen: 'You desire something of which you will never be master.'

That she had had influence enough on such a career as his to drive him out from the world where all his interests, pursuits, and friendship lay, had pleased her with more keenness in her pleasure than similar victories often gave her. She had seen his return to Europe with amusement, even with derision; she had seen at a glance that he had fled in vain from her; she had been diverted, but she had remained indifferent.

In those morning hours when he had addressed her with an almost brutal candour, he had taken a hold upon her admiration which he had never gained before. His accents had lingered on her ear; his regard had burned itself into her remembrance; she had begun to look forward to his next approach, after her rejection, with something more than the merely intellectual curiosity with which before she had studied the results of her influence upon him. The news of his intended marriage came to her with a sense of surprise and of affront which was more nearly regret than any sentiment she had ever experienced. It seemed to her supremely ridiculous that a man who adored *her* should seek or hope to find any oblivion elsewhere; she even understood that it was no such hope which had actuated him, but rather his wounded pride which had rebelled against herself and been unwilling to allow the world to consider him her slave. Of the more delicate and more tender motives which had led him towards Yseulte de Valogne she could know nothing; but of those more selfish and embittered ones she comprehended accurately all the sources and all the extent.

'He does it to escape me,' she thought as she sat in solitude

while the last faint crimson of the winter's sunset tinged the light clouds before her windows; a smile came slowly on her beautiful mouth—a smile, proud, unkind, a little bitter. There was resentment in her, and there was also pain, two emotions hitherto strangers to her heart; but beyond these, and deeper than these, there was a caustic contempt for the man's cowardice in seeking asylum in an unreal love, in endeavouring to cheat himself and another into belief in a feigned passion.

'I thought him more brave!' she said bitterly to herself. 'He is like a beaten warrior who makes a rampart of a virgin's body!'

And yet, in that moment she was nearer love for him than she had ever been before.

CHAPTER XX.

BLANCHETTE was dancing round her cousin in the twilight of the January day, making her *pied de nez* triumphantly, but pausing every now and then to look up in her face with her habitual inquisitiveness, yet with a respect quite new to her.

'*Tiens, tiens, tiens*!' she was crying in her little shrill voice, like the tiniest of silver trumpets. 'To think you are going to be married after all! You will be ever so much richer than mamma, they say; you will be as rich as all the *Juiverie* put together, and you will be as great a lady as all the *grandes dames*. You will have as many jewels as Madame de Talleyrand; you will have as many horses and houses as Madame de Sagan; you will have two new gowns every day if you like. Have you seen the Hôtel Othmar? I have seen it; it is as big as the Louvre. What will you ask him for first? If I were you, I should ask him for a rope of pearls, all as big as pigeon's eggs. What are the Othmar liveries? I never saw them; the state liveries, I mean. I like canary-colour best, and Louis Treize *tricornes*. What will he settle on you? He will give you what you wish; I heard mamma say so. Make him give you S. Pharamond for your very own. I am sure you will not get half you might, you are such a silly little snipe; you are as tall as a Venetian mast on a feast day, but you are a simpleton. You cried when mamma told you he would marry you. The idea! You should have danced for joy. It would be delicious to marry him if he were as old as the hills and as ugly as Punch, but he is not old and he is handsome: all that *par-dessus le panier*, and thirty thousand francs a day, Julie says; and Brown and Schemmitz wanted to kiss your hand! What fun you would make of them if you were me. You should skip and shout all day;—I should. To be sure, he is *dans la finance*. but they are the only royalties nowadays; I have heard

mamma say so. Whatever can he see in you? You are pretty and tall, but you don't know it; you stand and stare like an owl with your big eyes. What can he want with you? He will give you everything, he must be a simpleton, too! he might marry somebody quite great; none of them can imagine what he wants you for——'

'Oh, Blanchette!' said Yseulte de Valogne, with a look of pain, as she tried to silence her little tormentor, whose words she only vaguely heard as she stood lost in the golden mists of an incomparable dream.

'*Vrai!*' said the cruel little child. 'Nobody can think what he can see in you. It is Madame Napraxine whom he loves.'

Yseulte coloured with sudden anger, and a look of severity and sternness came on her youthful face, while its happy wistful eyes lost their light and grew cold:

'You must not say these things, Blanchette,' she said sternly; 'you may laugh at me as you like, but you must respect M. Othmar.'

The red deepened in her cheeks as she spoke, and realised that she had the right to defend his name thus. She was thinking in herself as she did so: 'If it were true, if I thought it were true, I would bury myself in the convent for ever.'

The quick little mind of Blanchette divined the direction of her thoughts, and dearly as the child loved to do mischief and to torment, she loved her own pleasure and gain better. She had no wish for this *beau mariage* to be broken off, as she foresaw from it endless diversion, gifts, and bonbons for herself.

'Othmar will give us each at least a medallion with diamonds on the back,' she reflected; and she was conscious, too, that if the marriage fell through by any doing of hers, her mother would be unsparing in her punishment, of which not the least portion would be banishment to Bois de Roy; for Blanchette adored her spring-time in Paris, her summer months at Deauville and Homburg and Biarritz, her wagers on the *petits chevaux*, her exploits in the water, and the many whispers of scandals and naughty witticisms which she caught, when apparently engrossed with her toy balloon or her ball, behind the chairs of her mother and other great ladies on the sand by the sea or under the trees of the fashionable inland baths.

With a rapid remembrance of all that she herself would lose if there were no grand wedding at which she would assist at the Madeleine or S. Philippe du Roule, she threw her arms about her cousin with her most coaxing *câlinerie*: 'It was only my fun,' she whispered; 'pray, don't tell anyone, *chérie*. It was years and years ago that they laughed about Madame Napraxine; of course, it is you he loves now. Why should he marry you if he did not? He could marry anywhere, anybody,—mamma says so. And you *are* handsome, if you would only think it! Mamma says when

you shall have been married a week, and have all your jewels, you will be superb.'

Her cousin's face flushed more warmly till it was the hue of those Charles Raybaud roses which she had used to pack for Nicole. Her heart beat in that tumult of emotion, of joy, and of vague, most sweet, fear, in which she had lived for the last twenty-four hours. She thought: 'Why, if he did not care for me, why, indeed, should he seek me?'

It seemed marvellous to her that it should be so, but she could not doubt it.

She had only seen him for ten minutes that morning, in the presence of the Duchesse de Vannes, but though her confusion had been too great to let her eyes meet his, the few soft grave words he had spoken, and the touch of his lips on her hand, had left with her an ineffable sense of protection and affection received. If it were not for love, why should he have paused on his way to thrust back the gates of the convent and take her to himself?

As for herself, the timid, pure, half-unconscious feeling which he had awakened in her was growing in strength with every hour now that it had recognised its own existence and been permitted its expansion without shame. It remained as shy and fearful as a freshly captured wood-dove, but it had in it all the elements of an intense and devoted passion.

She did not hear the child's chatter, which rippled on like a little brook, asking her a thousand questions of what she would do, of what she would wear, of what she would give away. Blanchette was herself half sympathetic, half envious; disposed to resent her cousin's sudden and splendid change of destiny, yet inclined to rejoice in it, as it would secure to herself a spectacle, a new costume, and a costly gift. She kept looking at the girl critically, with her head on one side, and affecting to help her only hindered her, as she dressed for the first ceremonious dinner at which she had ever assisted.

'To think you can dress yourself; how queer!' cried the little censor. 'I cannot put on a stocking, nor Toinon either. I never mean to do it. Mamma could not to save her life. How many women will you have? Two? three? Never let your maids carry your jewel-box; have it always put in the train by your major-domo, between two footmen. Mamma says all the robberies are done by the maids. What are you going to put on? You have only white frocks. Don't you long to wear satin and velvet? Oh, you are so stupid; you ought to marry a shepherd, and wear lambs' wool that you spun yourself. You must not be so simple. A Countess Othmar ought to be very magnificent. The Finance is nothing if it do not look gorgeous. Oh, what are you doing? You must not put a black sash on; you are a *fiancée*. Have you got nothing but black? Wait a minute; I will run and get one of mine.'

'I have always worn something black or grey since my grandmother died,' said Yseulte, a little sadly.

But Blanchette made a *pirouette*.

'Henri IV. est sur le Pont-Neuf!' she cried. 'Oh, you silly! You were Cendrillon yesterday; now you are the prince's betrothed. Yesterday you were a little brown grub; now you are a butterfly. I will go and get my sash.'

The child flew out of the room and left Yseulte standing before the mirror, looking shyly at her own reflection as though she saw a stranger. She felt, indeed, a stranger to herself; so long she had been resigned to the religious life, so long she had been accustomed to regard obscurity, neglect, sadness, loneliness, as her natural lot; so long she had been trained to submission, lectured to the shade and the silence of resignation, and to be thus suddenly called out into the light, and lifted on to a pedestal, dazzled and almost paralysed her.

It seemed to her as though it could never be herself, Yseulte de Valogne, to whom her cousin had said, with an admiration that was almost reverence: 'You will be the most enviable woman in Europe. Do you understand all you have done for yourself?'

She did not understand it; she only understood that he had rescued her from the conventual life, and that he loved her—surely he loved her, or he would not wish ?——

Blanchette flew back into the room, accompanied by the maid Françoise.

'Yseulte! Yseulte!' she shrieked, waving a blue sash in one hand and with the other clasping to her a square parcel tied with silver cord. 'Here is something he sends you: Françoise was bringing it. Open it quick, quick. Oh, what a happy creature you are, and you only stand and stare like the statues in the Luxembourg! Open it quick! It is sure to be something worth thousands and thousands of francs.'

'Hush, Blanchette!' said the girl, with a look of pain, as she took the packet and undid its covering. Within was the ivory casket; and within the casket was a necklace of great pearls.

A little note lay on them, which said merely:—

'*No one can dispossess you of the casket now. Receive what is within as a symbol of your own innocence and of my reverence for it.* —*Yours, with devotion,* OTHMAR.'

On the other side of the paper was written more hastily:—

'*Pardon me that I must leave immediately after dinner for Paris and shall not see you for a few days. I have explained to the Duchesse.*'

Yseulte grew very pale. If the eyes of her little tormentor and of the woman Françoise had not been on her, she would have kissed his note and fallen on her knees and wept. As it was, she stood still in silence, reading the lines again and again, with

sweet, warm tears in her eyes. It was Blanchette who took out the pearls and held them up in the lamplight, and appraised their value with the keenness of a jeweller and screamed in rapture over their size and colour.

'They *are* the pigeon's eggs!' she cried, 'and four ropes of them; they must be worth an empire. They are as fine as mamma's, and she has only three rows. I will marry into the Finance myself. Oh, what a happy creature you are! Brown says it all came out of your going to gather flowers in his garden. Is that true? How clever it was of you! Who would ever have believed you were so clever, with your silent ways and your countryfied scruples. Let me see his note? You will not? What nonsense! You must put the pearls on. Let me fasten them. Four ropes! They are fit for a Court ball. What a *corbeille* he will send you!'

As she chattered she clasped it round the throat of her cousin, who grew red, then white, as the pearls touched her skin. They made her realise the immense change which one short day had made in her lot. They made her realise that Othmar henceforth was her lover.

While Blanchette chirped and skipped around her, directing her toilette with the accurate instinct in decoration of a little Parisienne, the eyes of the girl were suffused with unshed tears of gratitude and tremulous joy.

'What can I render thee, O princely giver?'

she was saying in her heart, although she had never read the Portuguese sonnets; while her little cousin babbled on of jewels and ball-dresses, and horses and establishments, and dowries and settlements, and the *régime dotal*, and all the many matters which meant marriage to the precocious comprehension of Blanchette.

'You will have your box at all the theatres, will you not? You have never been to a theatre, but I have. Mind that you go the evening after your marriage. When will your marriage be? I heard mamma say that he wished it to be very soon: but then there is all your *lingerie*, and all your gowns to be made. I suppose mamma will give you your trousseau; she must. Oh, how happy you ought to be, and you look just as grave as an owl! Nobody would guess you were going to be the Countess Othmar. Do you know that he could be made a prince if he liked? You have never learned to ride, Yseulte. What a pity! It is so *chic* to ride early in the Bois. Well, you will have a *coupé* for the early morning, and then you will have a Daumont for the afternoon, of course. There is nothing so pretty as postillions in velvet jackets and caps—if you only knew what colour his liveries are? Won't you have out-riders? I do not know, though, whether you can; I think it is only ambassadresses and princesses of the blood who may have out-riders——You might have a

special train every day,' continued Blanchette, exciting herself with her own visions. 'There is nothing such fun as a special train; we had one when grandmère was dying at Bois le Roy all in a moment and wanted to see us; it is so diverting to go on, on, on, through all the stations, past all the other trains, never stopping—pr-r-r-rut!'

'Oh, hush, Blanchette! What do I care about those things?' murmured Yseulte, as she put his note into the casket, locked it, and slipped the little silver key in her bosom, blushing very much as she did so.

It seemed so very wonderful to her that such lines should have been written to her. She wanted to be all alone to muse upon the marvel of it. She remembered a little nook in the convent garden where a bench was fixed against the high stone wall, under the branches of an old medlar tree; a place that she had gone to with her sorrows, her fancies, her visions, her tears, very often; she would have liked to have gone now to some such quiet and solitary nook, to realise in peace this miracle which had been wrought for her. But that was impossible; they had ordered her to dine with them at eight—her first great dinner. She must submit to be gazed at, commented on, complimented, felicitated.

The sensitive, delicate nature of the child shrank from the publicity of her triumph; but she understood that it was her duty, that henceforth these things would be a prominent portion of her duties; the wife of Othmar could not live shut away from the world.

Blanchette tossed her golden head with immeasurable contempt. 'It is all "those things" that make a *grand mariage*. If you think you do not care now, you will care in a year's time. Mamma said so. Mamma said you will be just like anybody else when you shall have been in the world six months.'

Yseulte shook her head with a smile, but she sighed a little also; it pained her that the world, and all it gave, was so intermingled with this beautiful, incredible, dream-like joy which had come to her like some vision brought by angels. In the singleness and sincerity of her young heart she thought: 'Ah! if only he were poor!—how I wish he were poor!—then they would know, and he!——'

But he was not poor, and he had sent her pearls worthy of an empress, and Blanchette was dancing before her in envy, longing to be sixteen years old too and betrothed to an archi-millionaire.

She cast one last timid glance at herself and at the great pearls lying beneath the slender ivory column of her throat, then she drew on her long gloves, and went, with a quickly-beating heart, down the staircase, Blanchette shouting after her Judic's song—

> On ne peut pas savoir ce que c'est,
> Ce que c'est,
> Si on n'a pas passé par là!

which the child had caught up from the echoes of the boulevards, and sang with as much by-play and meaning as Judic herself could have put into it.

There were some twenty people assembled in the oval drawing-room when Yseulte entered it. It was not of them she was afraid; it was of seeing Othmar before them. There was a murmur of admiration as she appeared in her childish white dress, with the superb necklace on, which a queen might have worn at a Court ball. Her shyness did not impair her grace; the stateliness and pride which were in her blood gave her composure even in her timidity; her eyes were dark and soft with conflicting feelings, her colour came and went. She never spoke audibly once in answer to all the compliment and felicitation she received, but she looked so lovely and so young that no one quarrelled with her silence. When Othmar gave her his arm she trembled from head to foot, but no one noticed it save Othmar himself.

'Do not be afraid of me, my child,' he murmured, and for the first time she took courage and looked at him with a rapid glance that was like a beam of sunlight. The look said to him, 'I am not afraid, I am grateful; I love you, only I dare not say so, and I hardly understand what has happened.'

The dinner seemed both to her and to him interminable; she was quite silent through it, and ate nothing. She was conscious of a sullen gaze which her cousin, de Vannes, fastened on her, and which made her feel that, by him, she was unforgiven. She was confused by the florid speech made to her by the Baron Friederich, who was so enchanted by her that he put no measure to his audible admiration. Othmar, seated beside her, said very little. The party was gay, and the conversation animated. The silence of each of them passed unnoticed. The Duchesse, who alone remarked it, said to Raymond de Prangins:

'It is their way of being in love; it is the old way, which they have copied out of Lamartine and Bernardin de St. Pierre. It is infinitely droll that Othmar should play the sentimental lover, but he does. I want Nadine Napraxine to see him like that. I asked her to dinner, but they had a dinner party at home. She sent me a little line just now, promising, if her people were gone, to come for an hour in the evening. The child looks well, does she not? What jewels he has given her! they are bigger than mine. It is the least he can do; the Finance is bound to buy big jewels. Who would ever have supposed he would have seen anything in that baby, that convent mouse? To be sure, she is handsome. Such a marriage for that little mouse to make! a mere baby like that, a child proud of being the *médaillon* of her convent yesterday! After all, nothing takes some men like that air of innocence which bores them to death as soon as they have put an end to it. It is like dew; it is like drinking milk in the meadow in the morning; we don't care for the milk, but the

doctors say it is good for us, and so—— I wonder what she is thinking about. About her gowns, I dare say, or about her jewels. She is just like a vignette out of "Paul et Virginie." She need not pretend to be in love with him; no one will believe in it; he will not believe in it himself; he is too rich. What can he have seen in her more than in five thousand other *fillettes* he might have married? To be sure she is handsome. She will be handsomer——'

She put up her eyeglass and looked down the table at her young cousin with amusement and envy, mingled as they mingled in little Blanchette. The amusement was at the girl's evident embarrassment, the envy was of her youth, of her complexion, of her form, of all which told her own unerring instincts that Yseulte in a few years, even in a few months, would be one of the most beautiful women of her world.

And she said angrily to de Prangins, 'Some men like children; it is as boys like green apples.'

'At least the green apples are not painted,' thought the young man as he murmured aloud a vague compliment. Raymond de Prangins, like most men of his age, had never looked twice at a *fillette*; he had been three weeks in the same house with this child and had never addressed a word to her or noticed whether her eyes were black or brown; but now that she had become the betrothed wife of Othmar, the charm of the forbidden fruit had come to her; she had suddenly become an object of interest in his sight; he was never tired of finding out her beauties, he was absorbed in studying the shape of her throat, the colour of her hair, the whiteness of her shoulders, which came so timidly and with a little shiver, like shorn lambs, out of the first low bodice that she had ever worn. To know that she was about to belong to another man, gave her all at once importance, enchantment, and desirability in his sight.

CHAPTER XXI.

IMMEDIATELY that the dinner was over Othmar made his excuses and left Millo to take the night express to Paris. When once she knew that he was absent, she lost all fear.

Her innocent love was at that stage when the presence of a lover is full of trouble and alarm, and the happiest hours are those in which his absence permits its dreams to wander about her memory undisturbed. When he was there he was still, to her, a stranger whose gaze embarrassed her, whose touch confused her, whose association with herself was unfamiliar and unreal; but, away from him, there was nothing to check or dismay those

spiritual and poetic fancies which had lodged their ideal in him. No one of those around her would ever have imagined that she had these fancies, or would have understood them in the slightest degree: they only thought that she was very naturally enraptured to be chosen by a very rich man, and did not doubt that in her mind she was musing, as Blanchette had suggested, on the colour of her liveries, the number of her horses, the places of her residence, and the prospect of her jewels.

Baron Fritz, who made her blush with the fervour of his compliments, and was so delighted with her that he could not cease from gazing at her as though she was a water-colour of Copley Fielding's, was alone sufficiently sympathetic, despite all his seventy years of cynicism, to perceive that the things of this world had little place in her thoughts, and he thought to himself as he looked at her:

'Will Otho be wise enough to appreciate all that? He will have the carnation in its bud, the peach in its flower; he will make just what he pleases of them; the worse will be if he should leave them altogether alone; then the carnation will unfold, the peach will ripen and come out into fruit unnoticed, and if he be an ingrate, they will both come to their perfection for someone else—which will be a pity. The child is in love with him—*parbleu*!—he does not deserve it; he only cares for his Russian woman, his hot-house narcissus; he only wants to cure himself of Nadine Napraxine; as if one blush of this child's cheek were not worth a century of Madame Napraxine's languor!'

And he felt a passing regret that he was not forty years younger and in the place of his nephew.

After dinner he seated himself beside Yseulte, and talked to her of Othmar, of his boyhood, of his talents, of his opportunities, and of his destinies, with so much tact and so much skill that she was moved to an affectionate gratitude towards the speaker and to a sense of infinite awe before all the ambitions and responsibilities with which he filled her future.

'She is a baby, but she is not a fool,' thought the wise old man. 'When the love fever has passed, we shall make of her just what we want, provided only that she has influence over Otho. But will she have any? In marriage there is always one who rules the other: "*un qui se baisse, et l'autre qui tend la joue*"; and it is always the one who *cares* who goes under.'

Even as he had eaten his truffles and drunk the fine wines grown on the de Vannes' estates in Gironde, he had been more troubled by an impersonal anxiety than he had ever allowed himself to be in the whole course of his existence. The child had sat opposite to him, looking so youthful beside the faces, more or less *maquillées*, of the women around her, with her soft surprised eyes, happy as those of a child that wakes from sleep, and her colour coming and going, delicate and warm: 'And he will not stay

here to see, just because the desire for another woman is in him like a fly in the ear of a horse!' had thought the Baron impatiently. He guessed very accurately that the departure of Othmar was due to a restless unwillingness to face the fate which he had voluntarily made for himself.

He himself had had no heed of Othmar's marriage except as a means of legally continuing his race; his only notion of a woman was Napoleon's, that she should bear many children; but as he looked at Yseulte de Valogne, something kinder and more pitiful stirred in his selfish old heart; she seemed to him too good to be sacrificed so; he understood that there would be other things than money and children which this sensitive plant would want; and worldly, unemotional, and unprincipled as he was, Baron Fritz was the only person present who divined something of the dreams which she was dreaming and felt a compassionate regret for them, as for flowers which opened at dawn to die perforce at noonday.

About eleven o'clock in the evening, when Yseulte was beginning to feel her eyelids grow heavy, and was thinking wistfully of her little white bed amidst the murmur of conversation unintelligible to her and the stare of inquisitive eyes, she heard with a little thrill of an emotion quite new to her the voice of the groom of the chambers, which announced Madame la Princesse Napraxine.

Jealousy she was too young, too simple, and too innocent to know; but a strange eagerness and an unanalysed pain moved her as she saw the woman whom they said that Othmar loved.

'Is that really Madame Napraxine?' she said in a low voice to the Baron, who was beside her.

'Who has told you of Madame Napraxine?' he thought, as he answered her: 'Yes! that is the name of the lady coming in now; she is a famous European beauty, though to my taste she is too slender and too pale.'

The girl did not reply; her eyes followed the trail of Princess Nadine's pale primrose-coloured skirts laden with lace, and fastened here and there with large lilies and lilac. Before that inimitable grace, that exquisite languor and ease, that indescribable air of indifference and of empire and of disdain which made the peculiar power of Nadine Napraxine, the poor child felt her own insignificance, her own childishness, her own powerlessness; she fancied she must look rustic, awkward, stupid: she grew very pale, and her throat swelled with pain under her lover's pearls.

'It is too early for you to have that adder in your breast,' thought Friederich Othmar, as he watched her. 'What a coward he was to go away, instead of standing his ground beside you! After all, why is everyone so afraid of this Russian woman?'

Aloud, he only said: 'The Princess is coming to you; courage, *mon enfant*. A woman of the world is certainly an alarming

animal, but you will have to meet many such, and you will be one yourself before very long.'

'*Fillette*, come and be presented to Mdme. Napraxine; she wishes it,' said her cousin at that moment in her ear. The girl shrank back a little, and the colour came into her face; she rose, nevertheless, obediently.

Nadine Napraxine came half-way to meet her, with an indulgent little smile, of which the compassion and disdain penetrated the inmost soul of Yseulte with a cruel sense of inferiority. Yet had she not been so humble and so embarrassed she might have seen a look of surprise in the eyes of her rival. Nadine saw at a glance that in this child there was no 'Sainte Mousseline' to be easily derided and contemned.

'How beautiful a woman she will be in a year or two!' she thought, with that candour which was never lacking in her in her judgments of her greatest foes. 'He is going to possess all that, and he only sighs in his soul for me!—what fools men are!'

While she so thought, she was still smiling as she came to meet Yseulte with that slow, soft, indescribable grace of which she had the secret.

'I am an old friend of Count Othmar's; you must let me be yours in the future,' she said with gracious kindliness. 'Shall I offend you if I venture to say that I am sure he is a very happy and fortunate person? I dare say I shall please you better if I say that he deserves to be so.'

The girl could not have found words to answer to save her life. Instinctively she made her grand eighteenth-century curtsey in acknowledgment. She was very pale; her heart seemed to sink within her as she realised all the charm of this her rival.

Mdme. de Vannes murmured a few amiable words, and left them opposite to one another; the girl trembled despite herself, as those indolent lustrous eyes scanned her with merciless investigation and smiled at her embarrassment.

It was her first experience of that obligation, so constant in the world, to meet what is dreaded and disliked with suavity and compliment.

'I am a great friend of your cousin, too,' continued Nadine Napraxine, with all the amiable condescension of a woman of the world to a child. 'We shall be sure to meet constantly in the years to come, which will leave you so young and make us so old! Where have you lived? In an old Breton convent? I wish I had lived in a Breton convent too! Come and sit by me and talk to me a little. Do you know that I am here to-night on purpose to see you. I had a tiresome dinner, all of Russian people, or I should have come here earlier.'

She drew the girl down beside her on a sofa with that pretty imperiousness of which women as well as men often felt the charm and the command. She was most kindly, most gentle, most flatter-

ing, yet Yseulte suffered under all her gracious compliments as under the most poignant irony. She answered in monosyllables and at random; she was ill at ease and confused: she looked down with the fascination of a bird gazing at a snake on the hand which held hers—such a slender hand in its tan-coloured glove and with its circles of *porte-bonheurs* above the wrist, and its heavy bracelets crowding one another almost to the elbow.

She could not have spoken more than Yes or No to save her life, and she said even these in the wrong places; but Nadine Napraxine did not make the mistake of thinking her stupid, as less intelligent women would have done.

She studied her curiously whilst she continued to speak those amiable and careless nothings which are the armoury of social life; toy weapons of which the young know neither the use nor the infinite value. She had all the kindly condescension, the good-humoured, amused indulgence, of a grown woman of the world for a schoolgirl; by dates she was only seven years older than Yseulte de Valogne, but in experience and knowledge she was fifty years her senior.

'*Elle est vraiment très bien*,' she said, as she turned away from the girl and took the arm of Friederich Othmar. 'At present she is like a statue in the clay, like a sketch, like a magnolia flower folded up; but Othmar will change all that. You must be so glad; his marriage must have been such an anxiety to you. Suppose he had married a Mongol! What would you have done?'

'It was not precisely of the Mongol that I was most afraid, Madame,' replied the Baron. 'Do you think, too, that a marriage is a termination to anyone's anxieties? Surely, the dangerous romance begins afterwards in life as in novels.'

'It would be very dull reading in either if it did not,' said Madame Napraxine. 'But we will hope that Mademoiselle and your nephew will read theirs together, and eschew the dangers; that is possible sometimes; and she will have one great advantage for the next five years; she will be handsomer every year.'

'It will be a great advantage if he find her so, but perhaps only others will find her so; marriage does not lend rose-coloured spectacles to its disciples,' thought the Baron, as he answered aloud, 'There can be no one's opinion that he could value as much as he is sure to do that of Madame Napraxine.'

'I imagine my opinion matters nothing at all to him,' she answered, with her enigmatical smile. 'But when I see him I shall certainly be able to congratulate him with much more truth than one can usually put into those conventionalities. Mademoiselle de Valogne is very beautiful.'

The Baron sadly recalled the saying of that wise man who was of opinion that it makes little difference after three months whether your wife be a Venus or a Hottentot; but he did not utter this blasphemy to a lovely woman.

The girl remained on her sofa gazing wistfully after this *élégante* who had all the knowledge which she lacked, and who impressed her so sadly with an indefinite dull sense of inferiority and of helplessness. She put her hand up to her throat and felt for his pearls; they seemed like friends; they seemed to assure her of his affection and of the future. People thought she was proud of them because they were so large, so perfect in colour and shape, so royal in their value; she would have been as pleased with them if they had been strings of berries out of the woods, and he had sent them with the same message and meaning.

She watched Nadine Napraxine with fascinated eyes; wondering where was the secret of that supreme seduction which even she, in her convent-bred simplicity, could feel was in her. In the few words which had been addressed to her she was dimly conscious that the other disdained her as a child, and derided Othmar as a fool.

Madame de Vannes roused her from her preoccupation with a tap of her fan.

'How grave you look, *fillette*,' she said with some impatience. 'You must never look like that now you are in the world. Everyone detests grave people. If you cannot always smile, stay in your convent.'

'I beg your pardon,' murmured Yseulte, waking from her meditation with a little shock. 'I did not know—I was thinking——'

'That is just what you must not do when you are in society. What were you thinking of? You looked very sombre.'

The girl coloured and hesitated, then she said very low:

'The other day—the day of the casket—you said he loved her—was it true?'

She glanced across the room at Nadine Napraxine as she spoke.

'Did I say so?' answered the Duchesse, with annoyance at herself. 'Then I talked great nonsense. But how was I to know then that he was thinking of you? Listen to me, *fillette*,' she continued, with more real kindness in her tone than the girl had ever heard there. 'You will hear all kinds of scandals, insinuations, stories of all sorts in the world that you will live in; never listen to them, or you will be perpetually irritated and unhappy. People say all sorts of untruths out of sheer idleness; they must talk. M. Othmar must certainly have some very especial esteem for you, or why should he choose you out of all womankind for his wife? That is all you have to think of; do not perplex yourself as to whom he may, or may not, have loved beforehand. All your care must be that he shall love no one else afterwards. You are tired, I think; go to bed, if you like: you can slip away unnoticed. You are only a child yet.'

Yseulte went at once, thankful for the permission, yet looking wistfully still at the delicate head of Nadine Napraxine, as it rose

up from a collar of emeralds. Madame de Vannes passed to the music room, where a little operetta was being given, with a vague compassion stirring in her.

'I am sure the old Marquise could not have given her more moral advice than I,' she thought, 'but I am afraid the silly child will have trouble, she is so old-fashioned. Why cannot she marry the man, and enjoy all he will give her, without perplexing herself as to what fancies he may have had for other people? What does it matter? She will have to get used to that sort of thing. If it be not Nadine who makes her jealous, it will be someone else; but one could not tell her that. How right I was not to send Blanchette and Toinon to a convent! The holy women make them so romantic, so emotional, so *pleurnicheuses*!'

At the same moment Nadine Napraxine said, when she had left her and was speaking to Melville of her:

'She is very interesting. She will have plenty of character; he thinks that he is marrying a child; he forgets that she will grow up, and that very rapidly. Marriage is a hothouse for women who are young. I was married at her age; in three months' time I felt as old—as old—as old as I do now. Nobody can feel older! You are sixty-five, you say, and you are so young. That is because you are not married and can believe in Paradise.'

'You mean that I hope for compensation?' said Melville, with his pleasant laugh.

'Or that you keep your illusions. There is so much in that. People who do are always young. I do not think I ever had any to lose!'

'It is great emotions which make happy illusions, and I believe you have never permitted those to approach you?'

'I have viewed them from afar off, as Lucretius says one ought to see a storm.'

'I do not doubt you have seen them very often, Princess,' said Melville, with significance. 'But as you have not shared them, they have passed by you like great waves which leave no mark upon the smoothness of the sand on which they break.'

'Perhaps,' she said, while her mind reverted to the scene of which her boudoir had been the theatre three days before; then she added a little abruptly: 'You know Mdlle. de Valogne well—you are interested in her? What do you think of her marriage?'

'I have known her from the time she was four years old,' replied Melville. 'I have seen her at intervals at the convent of Faïel. I am convinced she has no common character: she is very unlike the young girls one sees in the world, who have had their course of Deauville, Aix, and Biarritz. She is of the antique French patrician type; perhaps the highest human type that the world has ever seen, and the most capable of self-restraint, of heroism, of true distinction, and of loyalty. I fancy Elizabeth de France must have been just such a girl as is Yseulte de Valogne.'

'What eulogy!' returned his companion, with a little incredulous accent. 'I have always wondered that your Church did not canonize the Princess Elizabeth. But you do not tell me what you think of the marriage.'

Melville smiled.

'I might venture to prophesy if the success of a marriage depended on two persons, but it depends on so many others.'

'You are very mysterious; I do not see what others have to do with it.'

'And yet,' thought Melville, 'how often you have stretched out your delicate fingers and pushed down the most finely-wrought web of human happiness—just for pastime!'

Aloud he said: 'If she and he were about to live their lives on a desert island, I am convinced they would be entirely suited to each other. But as they will live in the world, and perforce in what they call the great world, who shall presume to say what their marriage will become? It may pass into that indifferent and amiable friendship which is the most usual issue of such marriages, or it may grow into that direct antagonism which is perhaps its still commoner result; on the other hand, it may become that perfect flower of human sympathy which, like the aloe, blossoms once in a century; but, if that miracle happen, such flowers are not immortal; an unkind grasp will suffice to break them off at the root. On the whole, I am not especially hopeful; she is too young, and he——'

'And he?' said Nadine Napraxine, with a gleam of curiosity in her glance.

'I am not his confessor; I doubt if he ever confess—to his own sex,' replied Melville; 'but if I had been, I should have said to him: "My son, one does not cure strong fevers with meadow-daisies; wait till your soul is cleansed before you offer it to a child whom you take from God." That is what I should have said in the confessional; but I only know Othmar on the neutral ground of society. I cannot presume to say it there.'

'You are too serious, Monsignore,' said Nadine, with her enigmatical smile. 'Marriage is not such a very serious thing, I assure you. Ask Platon.'

'Prince Napraxine is exceptionally happy,' said Melville, so gravely that she laughed gaily in his face.

Meanwhile Yseulte dismissed the maid, undressed herself slowly, kissed the pearls when she had unclasped them; and, kneeling down under her crucifix, said many prayers for Othmar.

She was soon asleep, like a tired child, and she had his note under her pillow; nevertheless, she dreamed of Nadine Napraxine, and her sleep was not the pure unbroken rest that she had always had before. Once she awoke in a great terror, her heart beating, her limbs trembling.

'If he did not love me!' she cried aloud; then the light of

the lamp fell on the open casket, on the necklace of pearls. They seemed to say to her, 'What should he want with you, unless he loved you?'

She fell asleep again, and with a smile on her face.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE fortnight passed away rapidly and dizzily for her. They took her at once to Paris, and gave her no time for thought. She lived in a perpetual movement, which dazzled her as a blaze of fireworks would dazzle a forest doe. All the preparations of a great marriage were perpetually around her, and she began to realise that the world thought her lot most enviable and rare. Often her head ached and her ears were tired with the perpetual stream of compliment and felicitation, the continual demands made on her time, on her patience, on her gratitude. What would have been ecstasy to Blanchette was to her very nearly pain. There were moments when she almost longed for the great, still, walled gardens of the Dames de Ste. Anne, for her little whitewashed room, her rush chair in the chapel, her poor grey frock.

Then she thought of Othmar, and the colour came into her face and she was happy, though always unquiet and a little alarmed, as a dove is when its owner's hand is stretched out to it.

To Yseulte he was a hero, a saint, an ideal. He had come so suddenly into her life, he had transformed it so completely, that he had something of a magical fascination and glory for her. She knew nothing of the House of Othmar, or of their position in finance; if she had understood it, she would have disliked it with the instinctive pride of a daughter of '*les preux*;' she had a vague, confused idea of him as the possessor of great power and wealth, but that taint of commerce, which in Othmar's eyes soiled every napoleon he touched, had not dimmed his majesty for her.

She was never allowed to see him alone; her cousin insisted on the strictest observance of '*les convenances*,' and though a Romeo would have found means to circumvent these rules, her lover did not. He was glad of the stiff laws of etiquette which forbade him unwitnessed interviews. He felt that if she asked him straightway, with her clear eyes on his, what love he had for her, a lie would not come easily to his lips. He was lavish of all offerings to her, as though to atone materially for the feeling that was wanting in him. The Duchesse was herself astonished at the magnificence and frequency of his gifts. Unasked, he settled S. Pharamond and an estate in Seine et Oise upon her in absolute possession, while a commensurate income was secured to her to

render her wholly independent in the future of any whim or will of his own.

'He is really very generous,' said the Duchesse to herself. 'But what perplexes me is, he is not in love; not the very least in love! If he were, one would understand it all. But he is not in the very slightest degree *amouraché*; not half as much as Alain is.'

But she was heedful that no suggestion of this fact, which her observation made clear to her, should escape her before Yseulte or anyone else. If he were not in love, yet still wished to marry, it was his own affair; and she was not his keeper.

To Yseulte, it was absolute shame to find that she was regarded by all who approached her as having done something clever, won something enviable in the lottery of life. A vague distress weighed on her before the motives which she felt were attributed to her.

When her cousin said to her, '*Fillette*, you were really very audacious when you went to gather those flowers at S. Pharamond. But audacity succeeds—Voltaire and Napoléon were right,' she could have wept with humiliation and indignation.

'Perhaps he thinks as badly of me, too!' she thought, in that perplexity which had never ceased, since his gift of the ivory casket, to torment her.

'There is storm in the air,' said the Duc once to his wife. 'Othmar will be like one of those magicians who used to raise a force that they could neither guide nor quell. He is making a child worship him, and forgetting that he will make her a woman, and that then she will not be satisfied with being hung about with trinkets, and set ankle-deep in gold like an Indian goddess. I am quite sure that this marriage, which pleases you all so much, will be a very unhappy one—some day.'

'You think what you wish—all men do,' said his wife. 'I have not a doubt that it will be perfectly happy—as happy as any marriage is, that is to say. She will adore him; men like to be adored. You can only get that from somebody very young. He will never say an unkind word to her, and he will never object, however much she may spend. If she cannot be content with that——'

The Duc laughed derisively.

'Gold! gold! gold! That is the joy of the *cabotine*, not of Yseulte de Valogne. What she will want will be love, and he will not give it her. With all deference to you, I see the materials for a very sombre poem in your *épopée*.'

'I repeat, your wish is father to your thought. In the theatres women do rebel, and stab themselves, or other people, but in real life they are very much more pliable. In a year's time she will not care in the least about Othmar himself, but she will have grown to like the world and the life that she leads in it.

She will have learnt to amuse herself; she will not fret if he pass his time elsewhere——'

'You are entirely wrong,' said de Vannes, with irritation. 'She is a child now, but in a few weeks she will be a woman. Then he will find that you cannot light a fire on grass and leave the earth unscorched. She has the blood of Gui de Valogne. She will not be a saint always If she find herself neglected, she will not forgive it when she shall understand what it means. If he be her lover after marriage, all may be well ; I do not say the contrary. But if he neglect her then, as he neglects her now——'

'Pray, do not put such follies into her head. Neglected! When not a day passes that he does not send her the most marvellous presents, does not empty on her half the jewellers' cases out of Europe and Asia.'

'He makes up in jewels what he wants in warmth,' said Alain de Vannes. 'At present she is a baby, a little saint, an innocent; as ignorant as her ivory Madonna; but in six months' time she will be very different. She will know that she belongs to a man who does not care for her; she will want all that he does not give her; she will be like a rich red rose opening where all is ice——'

'You go to the theatres till you get melodramatic,' said his wife, with contempt. 'I do not believe she will ever have any passions at all; she will always be the ivory saint.'

Alain de Vannes laughed grimly.

'Women who are beautiful and have good health are never saints,' he said, 'and saints are not married at sixteen.'

'Françoise Romaine was,' said his wife, who always had the last word in any discussion.

Othmar was more restless than he had ever been in his life, more dissatisfied, and more impatient of fate. Yet he was not sure that he would have undone what he had done, even if honour would have allowed him.

The tenderness which Yseulte had awakened in him, though it could not compete with the passion another had aroused in him, made him feel a charm in her presence, a solace in her youthfulness. The restrictions imposed on their intercourse sustained the mystic spiritual grace which the young girl had in his eyes, and it prevented any possible chance of disillusion or of fatigue on his part. Hers was really the virginal purity, as of a white rosebud which has blossomed in the shade. He was not insensible to its beauty, even whilst a beauty of another kind had fuller empire upon him. He had done an unwise thing, but he said to himself continually, 'At least I have made one innocent creature happy, and surely I shall be able to continue to do so; she can hardly be more difficult to content than a dove or a fawn.'

He forgot, as so many men do forget, that in this life, which

seemed to him like the dove's, like the fawn's, there would be all the latent ardours of womanhood; that in the folded rosebud there was the rose-tinted heart, in which the bee would sting. They met at ceremonies, banquets, great family réunions, solemn festivities, in which all the Faubourg took part. She was intensely, exquisitely, happy when she was conscious that he was near her, but she was as silent as a statue and as timid as a bird when he looked at her or addressed her. Every day, every hour, was increasing what was to become the one absorbing passion of her life, but he was too indifferent, or too engrossed by other thoughts, to note the growth of this innocent love. Alain de Vannes saw much more of it than he.

She had the spiritual loveliness for him which S. Cecilia had in the eyes of the Roman centurion who wedded with her; a more delicate and more ethereal charm than that which only springs from the provocation of the senses. A caress to her seemed almost a profanity: to disturb her innocent soul with the grossness of earthly love seemed like a sort of sacrilege.

The whole of this time was a period of restless doubt with him, and the sense that he had not been honest with her rebuked him whenever he met the timid worship of her wistful eyes. He thought, 'She would not give herself to me, if she knew!'

He was impatient to have all the tumult and folly which precede a great marriage over and done with. Every detail annoyed him; every formula irritated him.

'All I entreat is, that there may be no delay,' he said so often to her cousin, that Madame de Vannes ended in believing that he must be much more enamoured than his manner had betokened, and said with amusement to her husband:

'It has often been disputed whether a man can be in love with two persons at one time: Othmar is so, unquestionably. It is like the bud and the fruit on the same bough of camellia.'

'It is to be hoped that when the bud is a flower the fruit will fall,' said de Vannes, with a grim smile.

'You are not sincere when you say that,' said the Duchesse, 'and you know that both always fall—after a time.'

'A law of nature,' said her husband. 'And it is a law of nature also that others come in their place.'

'My dear friend,' said Aurore de Vannes, with good-natured contempt, 'when Yseulte shall have followed the laws of nature in that way, believe me it is not you who will profit by them. You were good-looking ten years ago—or more—but absinthe and bacarat do not improve the looks after five-and-twenty, and you have crow's-feet already, and will soon have to dye your hair if you wish still to look young. Yseulte will never think of you except as a *vieux cousin* who was kind enough to give her a locket—if she will even do that when she has got all the diamonds that she will get as Countess Othmar.'

Meantime, Othmar himself was constantly saying to the Duchesse:

'I put myself completely in your hands; only, all I beseech of you, Madame, is not to delay my marriage longer than you are absolutely obliged.'

'He does not say his happiness,' thought Madame de Vannes, as she said aloud, 'Well, what will seem terrible to you? I think I ought to exact a delay of at least six months. She is so very young.'

'It is her youth that is delightful to me,' he replied abruptly. 'I am old enough to need its charm. I should be glad if you would consent to our nuptials very soon—say within a fortnight. I have already instructed my solicitors to meet you and to make whatever settlements you and the Duc de Vannes may desire upon Mademoiselle de Valogne.'

'What! carte blanche?' thought Cri-Cri, with a wonder which she took care to conceal, while she objected that such speed as he desired was impossible, was quite unheard of, would be indecorous: there were so many things to be done; but in the end she relented, consented to name that day month, and reflected that he should pay for his haste in the marriage contract. It would make no difference to herself whether he settled ten millions or ten pence on her young cousin, but it seemed to her that she was not doing her duty unless, in condescending to ally herself with la Finance, she did not shear its golden fleeces unscrupulously.

In her own mind she reflected that it was as well the marriage should take place speedily, for she perceived that his heart was not much in it. She divined that some alien motive actuated him in his desire for it, and she would have regretted if any breach had occurred to prevent it; for, although she professed to her intimate friends that she disliked the alliance excessively, she was nevertheless very gratified at her own relative having borne off such a great prize as Othmar. One never knew either how useful such a connection as his might not become.

'I would never have let her marry into the *Juiverie*,' she said to her husband. 'But Othmar is quite different; his mother was an English duke's daughter, his grandmother was a de Soissons-Valette; he has really good blood.'

'And besides that,' said de Vannes savagely, 'he is a man whom all Europe has sighed to marry ever since he came of age. Why do you talk such nonsense to me? It is waste of good acting!'

'As you wasted your *médallion*,' said his wife, with a malicious enjoyment. 'If she had taken the veil, you would have been quite capable of eloping with her, the very infamy of the action would have delighted you. But Othmar will certainly not let you make love to his wife; he is just the sort of man to be jealous.'

'Of Nadine Napraxine, not of his own wife!' said de Vannes, with an angry laugh. 'Marry them quickly, while he is in the mind, and before Madame Napraxine can spoil the thing. In six months' time he will return to her, but that will not matter; our little cousin will be Countess Othmar, and will probably learn to console herself.'

'You are not hopeless?' said his wife, much amused. 'Well, I do not think with you. I believe that Nadine Napraxine has never been anything to Othmar; that the child, on the contrary, is passionately in love with him; and that the marriage will be a very happy one.'

Alain de Vannes shrugged his shoulders. He was very angry that the matter had turned out as it had done; the more angry that it was wholly impossible for him to display or to express his discomfiture, and that he was compelled to be amiable to Othmar and to all the world in relation to it, and bear himself before everyone as the friend and guardian of his wife's cousin. His fancy for her had been a caprice rather than anything stronger, but it was resentful in its disappointment and impotence, and might even be capable of some vengeance.

Faël had left sweet, solemn memories with the girl: the green gloom of the fern-brakes and the wooded lanes, the soft grey summers, and the evenings with their mysterious silvery shadows; the silent corridors, the tolling bells, the altars with their white lilies, the pathetic monotonous voices of the nuns—all were blent together in her recollection into a picture full of holiness and calm. Now that she knew what the gipsy woman had meant, she wished to be there for a little while to muse upon her vast happiness, her wondrous future, and consecrate them both.

She asked for, and obtained, permission to go to her old convent in retreat for the two weeks before her marriage. Madame de Vannes was inclined to refuse what she regarded as excessive and eccentric, but Othmar obtained her consent.

It pleased him that she should pass her time before her marriage with the holy women who had trained her childhood; it was not so that Nadine Napraxine had spent the weeks preceding her soulless union.

'You wish not to see her for two whole weeks?' said the Duchesse, suspiciously.

'I wish her to do always what she wishes,' he answered.

'She will be a very happy woman then,' said Cri-Cri, drily.

He added, with a little hesitation: 'It is her unlikeness to the world, her spirituality, which has charmed me; I wish her to retain them.'

'It will be difficult,' said the Duchesse, with a laugh. '*Fillette*,' she said with amusement to her young cousin, 'I do not know why you are so very solemn about it all; I assure you the soul has very little to do with marriage, as you will find out soon

enough. Why should you go in retreat as if you were about to enter religion?'

Yseulte coloured; she answered timidly: 'I am forgetting God; it is ungrateful; I am too happy; I mean—I grow selfish, I want to be quiet a little while to remember——'

The Duchesse laughed, much amused: 'You ought decidedly to have taken the veil; you will be a *religieuse manquée*! At your age I thought of nothing but of my balls and my bouquets, and of the costumes they gave me, and of the officers of the Guides—Alain was in the Guides, he was very good-looking at that time. I must say Othmar and you are like no lovers in the world that I have ever known.'

However, she gave her permission, and Yseulte went to the ancient stonebuilt fortress-like house of Faïel, where the quiet corridors were filled with the smell of dried herbs from the nuns' distillery and the little grey figures of the children played noiselessly under the leafless chestnut avenues of the tranquil gardens.

It was all so welcome to her after the babble of Blanchette, the tumult of congratulation, the succession of compliments, the perpetual sense of being exhibited and examined, discussed and depreciated; but it did not change her thoughts very much, for even in her prayers her wondrous change of fate always seemed with her, and she found that even amongst her pious and unworldly Dames de Ste. Anne the betrothed of Count Othmar was received as a very different being to the dowerless Yseulte de Valogne; and something of that bitterness which so often came to her lover reached her through all her guilelessness. Even Nicole, also, embracing her with ardour and tenderness, with the tears running down her brown cheeks, and pleading for the right to send her *pétiote* the orange-blossoms and lilies-of-the-valley for her bridal-dress, yet amidst her joyful tears and tearful joy had not forgotten to whisper: 'And, *dis donc, ma mignonne*, you will say a word now to the Count Othmar to get my husband the municipal concession to put up the steam mill? It will make our fortune, my angel, and I know what a happiness that will be to you!'

'A fortune! Money, money! It seems all they think of in the world!' the child reflected sadly. 'What can Nicole and Sandroz want with more money? They are very well off, and they have no children, no relations even; and yet all they think about is laying by one napoleon on the top of another! It is horrible! Even the Mother Superior has never said to me how good he is, how kind, how generous; she only says that I am fortunate because he is so rich! They make me feel quite wicked. I want to tell them how mean they are! Why am I so much better and greater in their sight because I am going to become rich too? I thought they cared for none of those things. But our Reverend Mother asks me for a new altar service as Blanchette

asked me for a turquoise necklace! I understand why he is always a little sad. He thinks no one cares for him, for himself.'

And, after many days and nights of most anxious thought and most entreating prayer, she gathered up all her courage and wrote a little letter to Othmar, the only one which she had ever addressed to him; she was afraid it was a strange thing to do, and one perhaps unmaidenly, but she could not resist her longing to say that one thing to him, and so she wrote:

'Monsieur,—I do not know whether I ought to say it, and I hope you will forgive me if it be wrong to say so, but I have thought often since I hear and see so much of your great wealth that perhaps—perhaps—you may imagine it is that which I care for; but indeed I do not; if you were quite poor, very poor to-morrow, it would be just the same to me, and I should be just as happy. I do pray you to believe this.

'Yours, in affection and reverence,

'YSEULTE.'

She had hesitated very long before she ventured to sign herself so, but in the end it seemed to her that it could not be very wrong as it stood: she owed him both affection and reverence—even the Mother Superior herself would say so.

She enclosed the little note in a letter to her cousin the Duchesse, knowing that otherwise it would not be allowed to pass the convent walls. When Madame de Vannes received it she looked at it with suspicion.

'If it should be any nonsense about Nadine Napraxine?' she thought with alarm; 'if it should be any folly that would break the marriage?'

She decided that it would be unwise to send it to Othmar without knowing what it said, so she broke the little seal very carefully and read it. Something in it touched her as she perused the simple words, written so evidently with a hand which trembled and a heart that was full. She sealed it again and despatched it to its destination. 'Poor little simpleton,' she thought, 'why did she take the trouble to say that? She will not make him believe it!'

But he did believe it.

It was because she made the belief possible to him that the child had seemed to him like a young angel who brought healing on her wings; and the love which did not venture to avow itself, but yet was visible in every one of these timid sentences, went to his heart with sweetness and unconscious reproach. He wrote back to her:

'I believe you, and I thank you. You give me what the world cannot give nor command.'

And he added words of tenderness which, if they would have

seemed cold to an older or a less innocent recipient, wholly contented her, and seemed to her like a breath from heaven.

The fortnight soon passed, and after its quiet days at Faïel, filled with the sounds so familiar to her of the drowsy bells, the rolling organ swell, the plaintive monotonous chaunts and prayers, the pacing of slow steps up and down long stone passages, the grinding of the winch of the great well in the square court, she felt calmed and strengthened, and not afraid when the Mother Superior spoke of all the responsibilities of her future.

To her, marriage was a mystic, spiritual union; all she knew of it was gathered from the expressions borrowed from it to symbolise the union of Christ and His saints. She went to it with as religious and innocent a faith as she would have taken with her to the cloister had they sent her there. If any human creature can be as pure as snow, a very young girl who has been reared by simple and pious women is so. Even the Duchesse de Vannes felt a vague emotion before that absolute ignorance of the senses and of the passions of life.

'It is stupid,' she said to herself. 'But it is lovely in its way. I can fancy a man likes to destroy it—slowly, cruelly—just as a boy pulls off butterflies' wings.'

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE first days of February came all too soon for the vague fears of Yseulte, which throbbed in her as the heart beats in a bird which feels a captor's hand approaching. All the ridicule of Blanchette and Toinon, all the good-natured banter of their mother, and all the endless congratulations of society which rained on her like the almond blossoms which were falling in showers in the wind, could not make her otherwise than bewildered and alarmed, and as the time of her marriage drew closer and closer her terror almost obscured her happiness. No one would have believed in it; everyone, had they known the secrets of her shy and silent mind, would have laughed at it as hypocrisy; but with her it was most real.

Away from Othmar, she adored him; but near him, she dreaded him as a stranger who was about to lead her into the strangest and most terrible mysteries of life. But time stays not for the sinking or the fluttering of any poor human heart, and they brought her from the dim, cold, misty Breton country back into the gay and crowded world of Paris; and the great rooms of her cousin's house, filled by brilliant throngs for the signing of the contract, brought home to her the inexorable fact that her marriage would itself take place in another forty-eight hours.

'You are so pale, *fillette*!' said the Duchesse in some impatience. 'One would think that we were forcing your inclinations!'

Yseulte said nothing; she could not have explained the tumult of agitation which was in her. She was marvellously happy; and yet——

A lover who had loved her would have divined and penetrated all those mingled emotions, which were unintelligible to herself; but Othmar was too *distrait* and too absorbed in thought, wherein she had no share, to do so. Though she was the centre of the world around her for the moment, the child remained in an absolute solitude.

Friederich Othmar, studying her with his exquisite power of penetration, alone perceived her trouble, and thought with pleasure: 'The poets are not quite the fools I deemed them; there *is* such a thing as a virginal soul in which the senses do not speak, and to which the gewgaws of the world say nothing either. I should never have believed that, but I see it. He has found a pearl, but he will not care for it. He will absorb it into the acid of his own disappointed passions, and then will be surprised if it disappear.'

If he had been told a month earlier that he would have had such sentimental regrets, he would have been wholly incredulous, but something in the sight of the young girl, in her innocent gravity, with her wistful, changeful eyes, touched him, as she stood by the table where the marriage contract was signed. She seemed to him too good to be wedded with indifference, taught the fever of passion, the suffering of maternity, and then be forsaken—as she would be.

'I am glad that I did not meet her, or one like her, thirty years ago; she would have unnerved me,' he thought, as he stooped and wrote his own name.

Amongst the nuptial gifts had been one of great value from the Princess Napraxine. It was a gold statuette of Love, modelled by Mercié and standing on a base of jade and agate. It had all the cruelty and irony of the modern Italian school in it, for the poor Amorino was trying to drink out of a gourd which was empty, and the expression of his disappointed, distressed, pathetic features was rendered with admirable mockery and skill. He turned his sad eyes ruefully on those who looked at him; some withered passion-flowers and a little asp were near his feet. When Othmar saw it, his face darkened; he thought it a jest at himself, nor had the giver selected it without intention. Behind the gold Amorino he seemed to see her smiling, serene, jewel-like eyes, her delicate contemptuous mouth, which said: '*Va donc*! *C'est le vieux jeu*!'

'The only woman that I shall ever love!' he thought with a thrill of remorse, of shame, and of anger, all in one.

What right had he, while his veins were hot with those unholy fires, to simulate love for an innocent and virgin life?

The morning came for which Blanchette and Toinon had been longing for a month; and clothed in palest blue velvet, carrying white bouquets as large as themselves, they wore at their throats the new diamond lockets of their ambition, with the miniature of their cousin within each, for which they cared nothing at all. But the diamonds were as large and as numerous as ever their hearts could desire. *'Vrai! Il est bon prince!'* they cried in chorus as they skipped round each other, and made the sun sparkle in the jewels, and sang the song of Judic.

Then they went to the church of S. Philippe de Roule, and made their little naughty faces as grave as mice that see a cat, while the incense rose and the organ pealed, and the Latin words rolled out sonorously, and the pale wintry sunshine shone over the brilliant crowd assembled there for the marriage.

Yseulte herself looked like a slender white lily.

The deep peace and serenity of her convent days had come there with her; certain instincts of her race kept her still and composed with the eyes of so many strangers upon her; a dignity that was exquisitely graceful blended with her childish air; she looked like some young princess of the Valois time, such as poets and painters still see in their dreams.

One of those special trains which Blanchette thought the supreme privilege of marriage bore them without a pause through the wintry landscapes between Paris and Blois.

The day was fine and windless; there was a scent of spring which breathed through the leafless poplars and willows, and over the frosted fields and vineyards, with sweet, vague promise; here and there burst in to sight, out from a forest glade beside some château, some gaily-clad hunting party, the last of the season; ever and anon there was some little town, with its old ruined castle, or its monastic church, shut in, in leafless orchards. The broad river glistened in the light under the burden of its many islands, its breaking blocks of ice drifting on turbid green waters, its flood of mud and melted snow rolling heavily beneath the colliers and the merchant craft, which made their way slowly against the floes. In the drear blackened vineyards, peasants, like pictures by Millet, were at work; sometimes a woman with faggots on her bowed shoulders straightened herself to watch the swiftness of the train, or a blue-frocked herd-boy stopped his cattle at a crossing.

All these pictures passed before the eyes of Yseulte like the panorama of a dream: the early morning hours had been one long bewilderment to her; though she had carried herself so bravely, her heart had beaten all the while like a caught bird's: even now the scent of the incense, the waves of sound from the organ, the sonorous voice of the great prelate in its admonitions, seemed to

come with her into the still, brown, fresh country; the sense of some infinite and solemn obligation, accepted and irrevocable, was upon her.

They had left Paris immediately after the ceremony; and the evening sun was glowing in the west and lighting the pastoral country with its leafless woods and glancing rivers as they reached the château.

Amyôt was a place of great beauty and stateliness; it had been built for François Premier, and had the salamander and the crown carved on its stones and blazoned on its metal work; it was surrounded by water like Chenonceaux, and in the sunset-glow its pinnacles and towers and high steep roof gleamed as if made of gold; it stood on a hill amidst great woods, overlooking the fruitful valleys and fertile plains which lie between the Loire and Cher, and in its gardens all the art that modern horticulture can boast was united to the stately avenues, the close-shorn turf, the long grey stone terraces with the motto of the Valois and the fleur-de-lis of France carved upon their pilasters, which had in their day seen the *mignons* of Henri II., and felt the feet of Diane de Poitiers and of Mary Stuart.

Amyôt was a poem, epic and *epopee* in one; she had never seen it before; she gazed at it with entranced eyes, glad that her home would be in such a place; then she looked timidly at Othmar.

He was not looking at her.

She sighed, hardly knowing why, but with a vague sense of neglect and disappointment. She was in a trance of mingled joy and dread. She saw the dusky avenue of yews through which they passed, the long lines of majestic terraces, the sheets of glancing water, the masses of camellias and azaleas, brought from the hothouses to make the wintry gardens bloom for that momentous hour, the vast fantastic solemn pile towering up against the evening skies. She saw them all as in a dream; she was wondering wistfully in her ignorance whether it were possible that she had offended him, or possible that already he regretted what he had done. She shrank a little from him, and sat quite silent as their carriage rolled under the great stone gateway.

There had been enough in his caresses, in his words, as they had come thither, to startle her innocent ignorance into some sense of the meaning and the demands of love, but they had left her dimly alarmed and troubled, as before some great mystery, and he had soon grown abstracted, almost indifferent, and had abandoned himself to his own thoughts.

Amyôt, even in its winter silence and sombreness, was a place where lovers could well forget the world; yews and bay trees made perpetual verdure around its lawns, and orangeries and palm-houses made ceaseless summer within its walls; in its halls and galleries old tapestries and Eastern hangings muffled every sound and excluded every draught; and in the warm air of its chambers,

ceiled with cedar-wood, embossed with the salamander, and the 'F.' in solid gold, and having embayed windows, all looking straightway south over the Loire water, the winter's landscape, seen through its painted casements, was but as a decorative scene set there for the strong charm of contrast.

They passed through the ranks of the bowing servants, and remained at last alone in the great suite of drawing-rooms, whose oriel windows all looked southward. They were rooms hung with pale satins, still ceiled with cedar, and keeping the Valois crown and arms upon their gilded carvings and lofty archways. They preserved the style and charm of the age which had begotten them. She was in harmony with them as she moved there, the dull red light which preceded evening falling through the painted panes on the dove-hued velvet and dusky furs of her travelling-gown, and touching the light gold of her fair hair coiled in a great knot above her throat.

He, when his servants had retired, kissed her hand with a ceremony which seemed, even to her innocence, very cold.

'You are at home,' he said gently. 'Here it will be for you to command, for all to obey.'

She stood before him in one of the embrasures of the windows; the cream-hued velvet of her travelling-dress trimmed with sable, caught the rays of the setting sun.

'You are châtelaine of Amyôt,' he added with a smile. 'Here I shall be but the first of your servants.'

The words were gracious, and even tender, but they touched her with a sense of chillness; she felt, without knowing why she felt it, that it was not with this courteous ceremony that he would have welcomed her if he had loved her—much.

She said nothing, though she coloured a little as he kissed her hands.

She moved to one of the great windows and looked out a little wistfully towards the rolling waters, the deep, dark brown forests with their purple shadows. The dim afternoon light spread over the landscape without, and through the gorgeous and majestic chambers, which had once heard the love words of the Valois. She had laid her hat down on a table near, the lingering glow of the dying day fell on her white throat, on her cheek with its changing colour, on the knot of orange blossom fastened amongst the lace at her breast; she thrilled through all her nerves as she suddenly realised that she was altogether his, to be used as he chose, never to be apart from him unless by his wish.

She gazed at the scene around her, troubled, perplexed, wistfully, vaguely alarmed, afraid she knew not of what; whilst he watched her with a certain futile anger against himself that her loveliness did not excite him and content him more, a remorseful sense that he was not the lover she merited and should have won.

A sort of self-reproach moved him as he looked at her in her

innocence, which seemed too holy a thing to be profaned by the grossness of sensual approach—on the morrow she would not look at him with those serene, childlike eyes.

It seemed to him almost cruel to rouse that perfect innocence from its unsuspicious repose.

Before he could speak again she had turned towards him; her lips trembled a little as she gathered her courage and said aloud what had been in her thoughts all the day through.

'It will be for me to obey,' she murmured, with the colour deepening in her cheeks. 'And I will do it always, so gladly: but would you tell me one thing: did you—I mean—if you had not cared for me a little, surely you would never have wished——?'

She paused, overcome by the sense of her own hardihood, and her eyes filled with tears; she longed to say to him, 'Instead of all your jewels, instead of all this luxury, give me one fond word,' but her timidity and her modesty would not let her lips frame the supplication. He was still as a stranger to her—a man whom she had seen scarce a dozen times.

The question in its timid commencement had said enough: his conscience shrank from it; he had always dreaded the moment inevitable of the fatal—

'If this be love, tell me how much.'

'Would you tell me?' she repeated very low, then paused with an overwhelming sense of her own hardihood and great immodesty.

She made a beautiful picture as she stood before him; the cream-hued satin falling about her, the warm cedar-wood panels behind her, the red light of the sunset shed like a glory upon her head and shining about her feet.

'Who would not love you, dear?' he murmured, with a hesitation of which her own confusion spared her from being conscious. 'Never doubt my affection. I have not been as happy as the world thinks me, but if I be not happy beside you, fate will indeed find me thankless.'

Nor was it altogether untrue; she looked infinitely lovely to him in that moment, with the tears shining in her upraised eyes, and the blue veins of her throat swelling where the orange flowers touched them; and all this was his—his as wholly as the budding primrose in the woods is the child's that finds it and may pluck and rifle it at will.

An emotion that was more nearly passion than he had hitherto felt for her moved him as he looked on her.

With a sudden impulse of the joy and mastery of possession, warmer and more eager than any she had roused in him before, he took her in his arms and kissed her throat where the orange flowers were fastened, and, with a tender touch, unloosed them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

'OTHMAR *filant le parfait amour* while he gathers wet violets under his Valois woods, is a truly admirable idyl!' said the Princess Napraxine, with her unkind little smile, a month later, while her eyes, from under an umbrella covered with old point duchesse, went indolently from the shining sea upon her right to the romantic gorge leading up to distant peaks of snow, which could be seen on her left through boughs of eucalyptus and mimosa. She was seated on the white terraces of a famous villa, crowning a promontory which carried luxuriant and fantastic gardens far out into the lazy blue water, across whose then smiling plains of azure light it looked straight southward to the cloud which was Corsica. It was the villa of another Russian magnate, Prince Ezarhédine, with whom there was at that time staying a mighty statesman at whose nod or frown Europe breathed lightly or held her breath; and under the guise of a breakfast there was an informal conference of diplomatists at his house that day.

Friederich Othmar was staying at S. Pharamond for two days to meet the great Russian, and conduct, over a cigarette and a glass of kümmel, one of those delicate and intricate negotiations in which finance and diplomacy had equal parts, and which were the delight of his soul, and made the special fame of the House of Othmar.

The great statesman was a charming person, Oriental in morals, Athenian in mind, and French in manners; and Nadine Napraxine, who so seldom could be persuaded to go anywhere, had deigned to come and breakfast with him there and allow him to recall her childhood.

'You would never give me a smile,' he said to her. 'At five years old you were as cruel as you are now. I remember taking you what I thought an irresistible bribe; a gardener in Saxe driving a wheelbarrow of bonbons. But you just looked at it—smileless—and said cruelly, "*Merci, Monsieur—mais j'en ai tant!*" You were five years old then.'

'"*Tant*" and "*trop*" are the spoilers of our existence,' she replied. 'I remember as a child I never cared for bonbons; I used to say that if they hung up where the church bells were, and one could not get them, one would care——'

'My intention was good,' said the great man piteously; 'you might have smiled on me for that.'

'That would have been very commonplace, everybody is amiable in that kind of way; I am not amiable, they say, and yet I am never out of temper—which seems to me the first requisite for amiability.'

'Serenity is unkind when it means indifference.'

'But indifference is so comfortable to the indifferent!' she had replied, and the reply admitted of no refutation.

Now, when the *déjeuner*, which had been the pretext and cover of the morning's informal but pregnant discussion was over, and she was about to go to her carriage, she had smiled with gentle condescension on the Baron, and asked him the tidings of Amyôt. Friederich Othmar, in his answers, had been incautiously and unusually enthusiastic in the hearing of a person who to all enthusiasm was merciless; the more merciless, because in a far-down and never-investigated corner of her own nature she was a little conscious that she also could have been enthusiastic—if it had been worth while.

She had laughed a little unkindly, and had made the remark about the wet violets; the Baron, slightly irritated and considerably in earnest, had replied, that to gather violets with your own wife was less exciting, but perhaps sweeter, and certainly wiser, than to purchase orchids for the wife of someone else.

'A most moral opinion, turned with classic elegance, and quite indisputable,' said Madame Napraxine, with much amusement. 'And orchids are so short-lived! Do you think home-grown violets live longer? Dear Baron, I am so glad to see you so pleased, and so poetical; Napoléon's desire for an heir made him quite brutal; your desire for your nephew's heir makes you quite full of pretty sentiment. Pray go on, you interest me! it is as if one heard Bismarck playing a guitar!'

'Like Napoléon, I dislike *les amours stériles*,' replied Friederich Othmar, with a smile. 'My nephew was in danger of letting his life drift away in a dream; I know no means of recalling a man to the practical happiness of existence so efficacious as a young girl's beauty.'

'You are very primitive in your ideas, dear Baron, for a person who has lived all his life in Paris,' said the Princess Nadine, with her little air of fatigue and of irony. She knew very well what had been implied in his words, and she resented them.

'Nature is primitive, Madame,' said the Baron. 'But after all, we do not improve on her, nor exclude her, do what we may.'

'You think not?' said Madame Napraxine, much amused. 'Well, for my part, I have never been able to discover that Nature is very charming: if we attended to her, she would make us eat with our fingers, fight with our teeth, drink only water, and wear no clothes; she would certainly, also, give Otho Othmar a score of wives instead of one Sainte Mousseline. Do not take to admiring Nature, Baron; she will lead you astray. It is too late for you to begin; no one after twenty can eat green fruit with impunity.'

'Sainte Mousseline!' echoed the old man, with more temper than prudence. 'Surely that epithet would not apply to Yseulte!'

'Of course not now,' said Nadine, serenely. 'Sainte Mousse-

fine has given way to the nuptial white satin. Only you spoke of Nature;—and if I were you I would not wish for Nature to prevail too much at Amyôt, for Nature has a sad trick of being soon satisfied, and dissatisfied, and disposed to change. You know it is only the poets who invented Constancy, at the same time that they created the Phœnix and the Hippogriff.'

'If I thought he could be unfaithful to so much youth and so much innocence——,' began the Baron, with some heat.

'He will not be so yet, at all events,' said Prince Ezarhédine. 'Men are not quite so fickle as Madame Nadine thinks.'

'Men are what women make them,' she replied, with her most contemptuous tranquillity. 'As a rule, they are always faithless to women who love them. It is tiresome to be loved; "*ça vous donne des nerfs.*" You get out of temper and you go away; then silly people say you are inconstant.'

'You will admit that at least it seems very like it,' said Baron Fritz.

The great statesman, standing near, looked a little wistfully at her. He thought that he would not have found it tiresome to be loved by the wife of Napraxine.

'The Countess Othmar will be too young to understand all that,' continued Nadine. 'She will give too much of herself. She will not have the first essential: *savoir se reprendre.* Love is like all other fine arts—it should be treated scientifically. Do you remember Sergius Veriatine? He was devoted to the Princess Platoff—my cousin Sophie. All at once he broke with her. Some one asked him why he did so. He answered honestly: "Un jour, elle faisait la faute de me prier de rester quand je voulais m'en aller." Serge Veriatine put the whole of male human nature into that sentence. Othmar's wife will be always begging him to stay when he will want to go; she is so young. She is, of course, in love with him; very much in love with him; and she is so unhappily inexperienced that she will be sure to tell him so a hundred times a day. Now, however pretty a story is, still when you hear it very often it grows dull: you see she is beginning with an immense mistake: Amyôt in the winter!'

'Amyôt is his choice as much as hers,' said Friederich Othmar. 'You know he always liked solitude. They will be in Paris in the first days of April——'

'Two months, or to speak precisely, seven weeks, of Amyôt in midwinter is precisely the mistake that a very young girl would be sure to make,' continued his tormentor. 'Amyôt is a delightful place in its way; it is like a page of Brantôme. I remember the admirable hunting parties he gave there for the Orleans princes. But all the same, seven whole weeks of Amyôt in the rain of February and March would damp any ardour that he might begin with—do you think he began with very much? What a pity there was no one to tell her that a man is bored so

soon! And Othmar is like Chateaubriand; he is the *grand ennuyé* just because his ideals are so high that it is wholly impossible to find anything like them anywhere. I am quite sure that he has imagined in this poor child an angel and a goddess; a kind of Greek nymph and Christian virgin blent in one. When he finds that she is only a child, who has had the narrowest of all educations, and is not even a woman in her comprehension or her sympathies, he will be intolerably wearied. If they were in the world, the disillusion might be postponed; at Amyôt it must come in two days.'

'You are very clever, Madame,' said the Baron with some irritation, 'but even you may perhaps for once be mistaken. She is very young, as you say; but for that very reason she will be like clay in his hands which he can mould as he will.'

'If he take the trouble to model it at all,' said Nadine Napraxine. 'If the sculptor do not touch the clay, it lies in a lump neglected till somebody else comes. She will not know, I fear, how to tempt him to make anything of her. Do you suppose they have taught her the art of provocation in her Breton convent? She will only sob aloud if he go away for an hour, and be plunged into despair if his kisses be one less in number. My dear Baron, you lost all your wisdom when you failed to persuade them to leave Amyôt. They say there is no living woman who can be seen at sunrise after a ball and keep her lover; I am sure there is not one who can be shut up with a man for two months in the country, in winter, and retain his belief in her.'

'You are very learned in these matters,' said the Baron, more and more irritated, 'and yet everyone knows that the Princess Napraxine has always herself despised all human affections!'

'It is not necessary to have sat in the midst of a maelstrom to have studied the laws of whirlpools,' said his tormentor. 'And what have human affections to do with it? You know as well as I do that humanity has only caprices and passions, with their natural issue, disillusions.'

Friederich Othmar thought of the terrace at Amyôt and the face of Yseulte.

Walking with her for a moment, alone, in the afternoon sunshine, he had ventured on a word of counsel.

'My dear child, you are very young. Let an old man tell you something. Otho has one serious malady; nay, do not look so alarmed, it is only the malady of his generation—caprice and ennui. He has not an idea that he is capricious, but he is so. Do not let his caprices pain you; but, as far as you can, vary with his varying moods; I think that is the secret of sympathy. Just now it is high noon with you; so there are no shadows; but shadows will fall. I want you to understand that. Otho is not perfect; in a way, he is very weak, though he has more intellect

than most men. Do not make a god of him. You will only spoil him and blind yourself.'

And then she had looked at him with that look which he recalled now as he sat by Nadine Napraxine, and had said with a dignity of reproach which had sat very prettily on her youthfulness: 'If he have faults, I shall never see them—you may be sure of that; and if you will tell me how to please him, I will never think of myself.'

Remembering this, the Baron, who had never in his life cared greatly for any woman or believed much in one, felt a restless anger against the prophetess of woe.

'When they predict fire they have already laid the powder,' he thought, impatiently.

Friederich Othmar was surprised himself at the feeling of affection and of anxiety which Yseulte had aroused in him. He had wished Othmar to marry that the race might be continued, but he had never supposed that any young girl would fill him with the solicitude for her own welfare which she made him feel for hers.

Women had always been *la femelle de l'homme* with him; no more; he was astonished at himself for being moved by a genuine desire to secure for her those more subtle joys of the soul which he had always derided. Before her he felt ashamed of his own grosser convictions (which a month before would have been so confident) that she could want nothing more than the riches her marriage conferred on her. Though he had been a man of little feeling he was not altogether without kindliness, and his keen penetration told him that hers was a nature which the glories and gewgaws of the world would do very little to console if its affections were starved or its higher instincts humiliated, and the prophecies of Nadine Napraxine but irritated him more because he knew that her merciless intelligence was as a seismographic pendulum which foretold truly the convulsions of the future.

'Surely,' she continued, 'S. Pharamond would have been a more natural place to select at this season. Amyôt is superb, but it must be sunk fathoms deep in snow.'

'There is no snow; it was open weather, and even mild,' replied the Baron, who was ready to declare that roses were blossoming in the ditches of the Orleannais.

'But why did he not come to S. Pharamond? It is a paradise of azaleas and tulips at the present moment.'

'It is a pretty place,' he answered; 'but perhaps more suggestive of Apates and Philotes than of the true Eros.'

'The vicinity of the *tripots* hardly accords with the solemnity of Hymen? Do you mean that?' she said, with her enigmatical little smile. 'Who would ever have thought to live to hear Baron Friederich mention Eros! Well, we will hope that the god for once will be like the Salamander which is emblazoned, and carved

so liberally, all over Amyôt. We will hope the fire that feeds him may not go out; but I am afraid the motto really means that what nourishes extinguishes.'

With that she rose and took herself and her sunshade, with its point duchesse, and her marvellous gown with its cascades of lace and soft pale hues, like tea roses, her provocative languor, and her admirable grace, from the terraces of the Prince Ezarhédine. She was followed by longing eyes and a silence which was the truest of compliments. To more than one there, the sun had set whenever she had passed from their sight.

'What makes the world of men so fanatic about that woman?' asked Friederich Othmar, exhaling all the unspoken grievances of his own soul in a rude grumble, as the sound of the whirling wheels of her carriage died away. 'Why? Why? There are numbers more beautiful; few, perhaps, with so perfect a form, yet there are some who equal her even in that. She is as cruel as death, as cold as frost; no one ever saw a flush on her cheek or a tear in her eyes, and when she smiles it is like the sirocco and the north wind blent together; and yet there is no woman so blindly loved.'

'Yet!' echoed Prince Ezharhédine. 'Surely, you should say "therefore." The sirocco and the north wind blent together are electric shocks to the most sated senses.'

'Yes,' added the great statesman who was his guest, 'and if it will not sound too pedantic, I will add also why it is. She is to her lovers very much what the worship of Isis became to the Latins. She blends an infinite subtlety of sentiment with an infinite potentiality of sensual delight.'

'Sensual! She is as cold as snow——'

'I know; she has that sobriquet. But everyone feels what a paradise would lie within if the snow were melted. Everyone hopes—more or less conscious or unconscious of his hope—to pass that frosty barrier. I think if Madame Napraxine ever loved any man, she would make such a heaven for him that he would be the most enviable of all human beings. But it would only last a month; perhaps six weeks. Although,' he added, with a faint sigh, 'it would be worth losing all the rest of life to be the companion of those six weeks.'

'If I may differ with you, Prince, I would say that, on the contrary, if ever Madame Nadine can be touched to love she will be most tenacious and most constant,' said Ezarhédine.

'Perhaps too much so for the felicity of the person whom she might honour,' added the Baron, with a smile that was a little impertinent. He had always disliked and dreaded her; she had wasted two years of his nephew's life, and he shrewdly suspected that she was the cause of Othmar's too slight ardour towards his young wife.

Meanwhile, the subject of their meditations and desires was

borne by her fleet horses over the sea-road homeward to Jacquemerille. She felt astonished, irritated, offended at the idyl of Amyôt. To have loved herself, and then to be content shut up within the stone walls of a country-house with a girl taken from a convent!

'He is like Gilles de Retz,' she thought, with bitter disdain. 'He takes the white flesh of a child to try and cure his malady.'

It seemed to her cowardly, sensual, contemptible.

She drove homeward through the olives and the lemon-yards and the green fields that were full of anemones and narcissus and of the bright gold and sea-shell hues of the crocus. The grey towers of S. Pharamond were on her left as she went, and beyond them the fantastic pinnacles and gilded crockets of Millo. She looked at them with an anger foreign to her character.

'Who could have dreamed he would have done so absurd a thing?' she thought, irritated against him and against herself. Never before in her life had the actions of any other person had the slightest effect upon her own feelings. She had not lived very long, it is true, but to herself she seemed to have an illimitable experience; and within her memory there was no record of any time in which she had cared one straw what another did. That she should care now, ever so slightly, irritated her pride and wounded her delicacy. She was a woman at all times truthful with herself, however it might be her amusement to mislead others. She was quite as cruel to herself as to anyone else in her unrelenting and inquisitive mental dissection. She pursued her self-analysis with a mercilessness which, had she been less witty and less worldly, might have been morbid; and she did not disguise from herself now that the tidings of Amyôt were an irritation if not a pain to her. She did full justice to the loveliness with which Othmar had sought to find oblivion of her own; and she knew that it might very well be that, as the Baron had said, he had become the girl's lover as well as her husband.

'Men are such poor creatures,' she thought with scorn. 'They are all the slaves of their senses; they have no character; they are only animals. They talk of their souls, but they have got none; and of their constancy, but they are only constant to their own self-indulgence.'

The contempt of a woman, in whom the senses have never awakened, and for whom all the grosser appetites have no attraction, for those easy consolations which men can find in the mere gratification of those appetites, is very real and very unforgiving.

Her scorn for Othmar, seeking forgetfulness of herself in the fresh and budding life of a child of sixteen, was equal to that which she felt for Napraxine finding solace for her own indifference in the purchasable charms of the *belles petites*; the one seemed as trivial to her as the other. When men spoke of their devotion, they only meant their own passions; if these were de-

nied, they sought refuge in mere physical pleasures, which at all events partially consoled them. She thought of him with increasing intolerance. She answered only by monosyllables to the remarks of her companions, and her mind wandered away to that stately place where life might well seem a love-lay of the Renaissance.

'He will soon be tired,' she mused, with cruel wisdom. 'In a week the child will have become a romance read through; a peach with its bloom rubbed off; a poor little bird which has only one note, and has sung that one till its master is ready to wring its throat. It is always so. I never see a baby run through the fields gathering daisies and throwing them down but what I think of men with their loves. The only passion that lasts with them is one which is denied, and even that is a poor affair. To be sure, sometimes they kill themselves, but that is rather out of rage than out of any higher despair. And for one who kills himself for us there are a hundred who kill themselves for their debts. Othmar never can have any debts, so he invents woes for himself, and captivity for himself, and he will die of neither.

Yet, contemptuous of him for what seemed to her his weakness and his unreason as she was, her thoughts attached themselves persistently to him. He was the only living being who had never wearied her, who had always perforce interested her, who had seemed to her unlike the rest of the world, and capable of a master-passion, which might have risen beyond mediocrity. How would it have been with them if he had stood in the stead of Napraxine, whilst she was vaguely open to dim and noble ideals, to spiritual emotions, to human affections?

'Pooh!' she thought. 'It would have been just the same thing. Love is gross and absurd in its intimacies; it is like the hero to his valet. Maternity is first a malady, and then an ennui; that *biche blanche* at Amyôt will learn that as I learned it. He would have been much more poetic than Platon, and much more agreeable; but I dare say he would have been much more exacting, and much more jealous.'

Yet the remembrance of Amyôt pursued her, and made her restless; with her lips she had ridiculed the idea of nuptial joys enshrouded in the wet woods and falling mists of the Orleannais; but in her heart she did not laugh; almost—almost—she envied that child, with the innocent, serious eyes, whom she called contemptuously *la biche blanche*, who was learning the language of love in the earliest dawn of womanhood.

'Only he does not love her!' she reflected, with pity, disdain, and satisfaction, all commingled. No! He loved herself. She believed in few things, and in few emotions; but she believed that so long as Othmar lived he would love her alone.

'*Quand on tient la dragée haute*!' she thought, with her unkindest smile at the fractiousness and ingratitude of men, as she

descended at the doors of La Jacquemerille, and with displeasure heard her servants say, 'M. le Comte Seliedoff awaits Madame la Princesse.'

CHAPTER XXV.

Boris Fedorovich Seliedoff was a young cousin of Napraxine's; he was twenty-two years old, tall and well made, with a beautiful face on his broad shoulders, a face given him by a Georgian mother. He had been an imperial page, and was now a lieutenant in the Imperial Guard. He was an only son, and his father was dead; he had a great position, and was much indulged by all his world, and was as headstrong and as affectionate as a child. Nadine Napraxine alone did not indulge him, and he adored her with all the blind ecstasies of a first love; he had obtained his leave of absence only that he might follow her southward. He was extremely timid in his devotion, but he was impassioned also; the moral question of his love for his cousin's wife weighed no more with him than it weighed with Othmar. His world was not given to consideration of such scruples. As far as she could be entertained by such stale things, she was amused by the worship of this boy. In Russia he had done the maddest follies at her whim and word; once he had come from Petersburg to the Krimea only to be able to dance one valse with her at a ball at her villa on the Black Sea; he had ridden his horse up the staircase of her house in Petersburg, and taken an incredible leap over a river in Orel, because she wished for a stalk of foxglove growing on the other bank; he had risked life and limb, position and honour, again and again, to attract her attention or to go where she was, and she had smiled on him the more kindly the more headstrong were his acts and the more perilous his follies.

Once Napraxine had dared to say to her:

'Could you not spare Boris? He is only a lad, and his mother trusts to me to keep him out of harm.'

She had answered in her chilliest tones:

'Pray keep him so. I do not think, however, that you give him the best of examples. Your clubs, your play, your various distractions, are not all of them virtuous?'

And he had been dumb, afraid to offend her more, though he was vaguely uneasy for his young cousin. The lad was terribly in earnest, and she only saw in him a young lion-whelp whose juvenile ardours and furies were half-grotesque, half amusing. Napraxine knew that if the lion-whelp went too far, or if she tired of his rage and fret, she would strike him with a whip like any other cur. But he dared not remonstrate more; and Boris Seliedoff, on a brief term of leave, had followed them to the seashores of the south-west, and was fretting his soul in futile rage before the indifference of his idol and the presence of her other

lovers. It would have been very easy at the outset to have checked the growth of this boyish passion, but she had diverted herself with it, permitted its exaggerations, smiled at its escapades, fanned its fires as she so well knew how to do, and it had sprung to a giant growth in giant strength. This day, when she drove homeward from the breakfast at Ezarhédine's, he was waiting for her at La Jacquemerille. For anyone to wait for her was a thing she detested; it was a disobedience to all those unspoken laws which she required her courtiers implicitly to obey. She expected everyone, of whichever sex, of whatever rank, in however high a degree of favour, to be the humble suer of her commands, the meek attendant of her pleasure. To be waited for without her desires being previously ascertained, made her instantly in a chill and irritable mood; it was a presumption. This morning she was especially ready to be irritated. When she saw the tall figure of the young soldier pacing to and fro, with feverish steps, the marble *perron* of her villa, she grew suddenly and disproportionately angry.

'The boy becomes audacious—intolerable—impertinent,' she thought. 'I should have taken him to Ezarhédine's if I had wanted him. He has had too much sugar, he needs the whip.'

All that was most cruel, most intolerant, most tyrannical in her, came with a cold hard look upon her delicate features; the temper of those of her people who had thrust their swords into the body of Paul began to awake in her. She was in the humour to hurt something, the first thing she saw; her eyes were full of scorn and of command as they looked haughtily at Seliedoff, and arrested him by a glance as he sprang towards her.

'Who told you that I sent for you?' she said, with that chill contemptuous gaze which froze the boy and magnetised him in the same moment.

'No one,' he said piteously; 'I thought—I imagined——'

'You imagined you were always welcome!' she replied. 'A very erroneous imagination. You may be so to Prince Napraxine, you are his cousin; but as the house is mine, I shall prefer that you shall await my invitation.'

She spoke slightingly, and with a coldness like the New Year ice of Russia.

Boris Seliedoff stood and gazed at her helplessly, fascinated by the anger of the gaze which swept over him in such supreme contempt. He had before offended, before had seen what her caprices and her unkindness could become when she was displeased; but all those previous moments had been as summer showers compared with this glacial censure which froze all his hot young blood. So often she had been content to see him; so often she had laughed at him with indulgence and benignity; so often she had called him '*beau cousin*,' '*cher enfant*,' and smiled at his haste and eagerness when he had done much more than this. Might not any stranger have waited to see her pass, to hear her speak?

Nadine Napraxine, with that one comprehensive disdainful glance, passed across the marble floor, and entered through the open glass doors of the house. She said nothing more. The young Seliedoff, who had grown first very red, then very pale, followed her timidly like a chidden hound, and paused upon the threshold, hesitating; he scarcely ventured to enter also without some sign from her. But she gave him none. She passed on through the salons, and ascended the low broad staircase without bestowing on him a single glance. Then he knew that she was gone to her own apartments, where no man living dared follow her. Boris Seliedoff stole into a little salon humbly and threw himself down on the first seat he saw. He covered his face with his hands; there were tears in his eyes, which fell slowly through his clasped fingers.

He was a young dare-devil who had eaten fire and played with death, and had hewed down men and women and children without mercy by Skobeleff's side; but he was a mere frightened, timid, wretched lad beneath the lash of her displeasure. He would have crawled for her pardon like her spaniel, even whilst he groped about in bewilderment and darkness to discover his own offence, and could not tell what it had been. An older man would have told him that it had only been the supreme fault of arriving at the wrong moment.

How long he sat there he never knew; he waited in the vague hope of a gentler word, a more kind dismissal, at least for permission to return. He did not remember that he would only increase his offence, prolong his error. The bright day was shining without on all the gay array of shining marbles, many-coloured azaleas, dancing waves, white sails, blue skies; within, the shaded light fell subdued and roseate on the porcelains, the tapestries, the bronzes, the stands and bowls of flowers, all the fantastic details of modern luxury. He might have been in a peasant's *isba* in the midst of a frozen plain for aught he knew. Two or three clocks chimed five, and the carillon in the stable-tower of La Jacquemerille answered them; for anything he could tell, he might have been there a whole day or only fifteen minutes.

Whilst it was still quite daylight, servants came in and brought lamps with rose-coloured shades and set them down noiselessly and went away. Seliedoff raised his head, but he did not leave his place; he sat like a figure of stone. He heard a sound of voices and of laughter; through the parted curtains of the *portières* he saw the vista of the three drawing-rooms which opened out of the small one in which he was. People were coming in and standing about conversing with one another in the rose-hued light of the lamps, lit whilst the sun was still shining. He then remembered that it was Thursday, her day, on which, from five to seven, the *dessus du panier* could come there and idle and

flirt and sip caravan tea, or syrups or liqueurs, and have the honour of a word from her, perhaps even of a word of welcome. As he looked and remembered, she herself entered the little room in which he sat, and which was the nearest to her own apartments. She cast a glance upon him, severe, astonished, then passed through to the larger salons. She wore a pale mauve-coloured velvet gown, with a *jabot* of old point lace, and the same lace peeping here and there from the folds of its skirts; she had some natural yellow roses at her throat; she had her hair *à l'empire*; she had never looked lovelier, colder, more utterly beyond the imitation of other women or the solicitations of men. He watched her receive the little crowd of people already there, and those who came after them; he heard her sweet chill voice, now and then her laugh; he saw all the men whom he hated gathered about her; and the murmur of the voices, the whispers of the discreet mirth, the scent of the flower-laden air, the rosy gleams of the lamp-light, the *frou-frou* of the dresses, the tinkle of the tea-cups, came to his ear as the sounds of the outer world come to a sick man in fever.

Geraldine was not there. She had always prohibited his appearance more than once a month at her *jour*.

'I will have no one seen in my rooms as regularly and certainly as Paul,' she had always said to him. Paul was her groom of the chambers. 'Whenever any man is seen perpetually anywhere, as immovably as though he were a clock or a bracket, he becomes ridiculous; and the woman who allows him to be there, still more so.'

Geraldine had been forced to obey, with whatever reluctance; usually he had consoled himself, as well as he could, with the *tripot*. A man is not often jealous of a day in which he knows there exists for him, in his absence, that safety which lies in numbers.

Boris Seliedoff sat on where he was with dogged persistence, his eyes rivetted on those pretty salons in which the comedy of society was being acted, and where he perceived nothing save that one form, when it came within his sight, with the grace of movement, the charm of attitude, which were especial to Nadine Napraxine. He thought the coming and going of her many guests would never end; that the buzz of the many voices would never cease. Once or twice men and women whom he knew came into the little room, and sat down there for a few moments; then he was forced to rise and speak to them, to say he knew not what. But he took his seat again immediately, and resumed his silent vigil. Some of them looked at him in surprise, for his expression was strange, and his black Georgian eyes were misty yet fierce; but he was not conscious of the notice he excited, he was only conscious that she never glanced towards him, never summoned him, once.

The two hours seemed to him endless. When seven had struck,

the last carriage rolled away from before the windows, the last lingering visitor, the Duc de Prangins—he who had killed young d'Ivrea—made his profound bow over her hand, and took himself and his elegant witticisms and his admirable manners back to the Hôtel de Paris at Monte Carlo. When the doors had closed on him, Nadine Napraxine stood a moment alone in the centre of her salon; then swiftly turned, and came towards Seliedoff. He rose, and awaited her sullenly.

Her right hand was clenched as though it grasped the handle of a knout, and was about to use it; a terrible anger shone from the lustre of her eyes; her lips were pale with the force of her displeasure.

'How dare you! how dare you!' she said between her teeth.

So might an empress have spoken to a moujik.

To have waited unbidden in her room, seen by all the world, sulking there as though he were a lover once favoured, now dispossessed; making of himself a spectacle, a ridicule, a theme for the comment and chatter of society—it seemed to her such intolerable presumption, such infinite insolence, that she could have struck him with her clenched hand if her dignity had not forbade her. For all her world to see this love-sick boy half-hidden in an inner room, as though by her welcome and authority! She, who had dismissed kings as others dismiss lackeys when she had found them too presuming, could find no chastisement vast enough for such a sin against her authority and her repute.

Seliedoff was but a spoilt child; he had had his own will and way unchecked all his short life, and all his companions and servants had existed only for his pleasure. A foolish and doting mother had never bridled his wishes or tamed his passions. Before Nadine Napraxine alone had the arrogant young noble become submissive, suppliant, and humble. Now, in his torture and his sense of wrong, the natural self-will and fury of a spoilt child crossed, of an adoring youth checked and repudiated, broke away from the bonds of fear in which she had always held them. He answered her with a torrent of words, unconsidered and unwise, beyond all pardon.

'You have treated me like a dog!' he said in conclusion, his voice choked in his throat, the veins of his forehead injected. 'You have caressed me, called me, allowed me every liberty, been pleased with my every folly; and now you turn me out of your house as you would turn the dog if he misbehaved himself. But I am not a dog, I am a man, and that you shall know, by God——'

He came nearer to her, his eyes red and covetous, his boyish face inflamed with fiercest passion, his arms flung out to seize her.

She looked at him, such a look as she would have given to a madman to control, and awe him; he paused, trembled, dared not draw nearer to her.

She was deeply, implacably offended by what had passed. For him to permit himself such language and such actions, seemed to her as intolerable an insult as if the African boy in her service had dared to disobey her. It was the first time that anyone had ever ventured to insult her; it irritated all her delicacy, infuriated all her pride. She never paused to think what provocation she had given; she would have struck him dead with a glance had she been able.

'You are unwell, and delirious,' she said in her serenest, chillest tones. 'You know neither what you do or say. I have been kind to you, and you have presumed to misinterpret my kindness. Your cousin would treat you like a hound, if he knew. But you are ill, so there is excuse for you. Go home, and I will send you my physicians.'

Then she rang; and when a servant entered from the antechamber she turned to him:

'M. le Comte Seliedoff desires his carriage.'

The boy looked at her with a terrible look in his eyes—pitiful, baffled, imploring, delirious.

'Nadine, Nadine,' he whispered hoarsely, 'will you send me away like that—to die?'

But she had passed, with her slow soft grace, into the adjoining room. He heard her say to Melville, who had been asked there:

'You are after my hours, Monsignore, but you are always welcome.'

Seliedoff, with a mist like blood before his eyes, staggered out of the little salon into the mild primrose-scented evening air, hearing, as in a dream, the voices of the servants who told him that his horses waited.

'She will never forgive; she will never forgive,' he thought, with a sickening sense that this one moment of insanity had severed him for ever from the woman he worshipped. 'She will never forgive; I shall never enter her house again!'

All the lovely scene stretching before him in its peace and luxuriance, as the stars came out in the deep blue skies and the daylight still lingered upon shore and sea, was blotted out for him by a red haze as of blood and of tears.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Meanwhile Melville, who had come to take his leave before proceeding to Paris under orders from the Vatican, found his hostess evidently *ennuyée*; she was not in her usual serene humour.

'What has irritated you, Princess?' that very observant

person presumed at last to ask. 'Have you actually discovered that doubled rose-leaf of whose existence you have been always sure and I always sceptical?'

'The double rose-leaf is that enormous nuisance, *la bêtise humaine*,' she replied with ennui, breaking off some blossoms of an odontoglossum standing near her. 'It is like the fog in London, it penetrates everywhere, you cannot escape it; there has been no rose-glass made which could shut it out. If Balzac had written for centuries, he would never have come to an end of it. Do you ever find any variety in your confessional? I never do in my drawing-rooms.'

'And yet who should find it, if not Madame Napraxine?' said Melville, who, when in his worldly moods, did not especially care to be reminded that he was a churchman.

'I do not know who should—I know that I never do,' she replied. 'I have made *la chasse au caractère* ever since I was old enough to know what character meant; and my only wonder is how, out of such a sameness of material, St.-Simon and La Bruyère and Ste.-Beuve, and all those people who write so well, ever were able to make such entertaining books. I suppose it is done by the same sort of science which enables mathematicians to make endless permutations out of four numbers. For myself, I should like other numbers than those we know by rote.'

'Good heavens!' thought Melville, 'when men have died because she laughed! Is that so very commonplace? or, is it not tragic enough?'

Aloud he said, in his courtliest manner:

'Princess, I fear the sameness of human nature tries you so greatly because of the sameness of emotions which you excite in it; I can imagine that too much adoration may cloy like too much sugar. Also, in your *chasse au caractère* you have, like all who hunt, left behind you a certain little bourgeois quality called pity; an absurd little quality, no doubt, still one which helps observation. I am sure you have read Tourguenieff's little story of the quail?'

'Yes; but one eats them still, you know, just the same as if he had never written it. Pity may be a microscope, I do not know; besides, you must admit that a quail is a much lovelier little life than a man's, and so can excite it so much more easily. A quail is quite a charming little bird. Myself, I never eat birds at all; it is barbarous.'

'What I meant to say was,' suggested Melville, 'that, in that tiny tale, Tourguenieff, like a poet, as he was, at heart, describes precisely what sympathy will do to open the intelligence of the closed lives of others, whether bird or man. Perhaps, Madame, sympathy would even do something to smooth the creases out of your rose-leaf—if you tried it.'

'I suppose I am not sympathetic,' said Nadine Napraxine,

stripping the petals of the odontoglossum; 'they all say so. But I think it is their own fault; they are so uninteresting.'

'The quail,' said Melville, 'to almost everybody is only a little juicy morsel to be wrapped in a vine-leaf and roasted; but Tourguenieff had the vision to see in it the courage of devotion, the heroism of maternity, the loveliness of its life, the infinite pathos of its death. Yet, the exceptional estimate of the student's view of it was quite as true as the general view of the epicure.'

'Am I an epicure?' said Nadine Napraxine, amused.

'Spiritually, intellectually, you are,' replied Melville; 'and so nothing escapes the fastidiousness of your taste; yet perhaps, Madame, something may escape the incompleteness of your sympathies.'

'That is very possible; but, as I observed to Lady Brancepeth when she made me a similar reproach, one is as one is made. One is Tourguenieff or one is Brillat-Savarin, all that is arranged beforehand for one—somewhere.'

Melville had learned the ways of the world too well not to know how to glide easily, with closed eyes and averted ears, over such irreverences; but he ventured to say:

'One cannot dispute the fact of natural idiosyncrasy and inclination, of course; but may not one's self-culture be as much of the character as of the mind? Might it not become as interesting to strive and expand one's moral as one's intellectual horizon? It seems so to me, at the least.'

She laughed, and rang a little silver bell for Mahmoud to bring them some fresh tea.

'My dear Monsignore,' she said, with amusement and admiration; 'for enwrapping a kernel of religious advice in an envelope of agreeable social conversation, there is not your equal anywhere —you may well be beloved of the Propaganda! But, alas! it is all wasted on me.'

Melville reddened a little with irritation:

'I understand,' he answered. 'I fear, Princess, that you are like Virschow or Paul Bert, who are so absorbed in cutting, burning, and electrifying the nerves of dogs that the dog, as a sentient creature, a companion, and a friend, is wholly unknown to them. Humanity, poor Humanity, is your dog.'

'Will you have some tea?' she said, as Mahmoud brought in her service made by goldsmiths of the Deccan, who sat on mats under their banana trees, with the green parrots flying over the aloes and the euphorbia, and who produced work beside which all the best which Europe can do with her overgrown workshops is clumsy, inane, and vulgar.

'What you suggested was very pretty,' she continued, pouring out the clear golden stream on the slices of lemon; 'and I had no right to laugh at you for wrapping up a sermon in *nougat*. Of course the character ought to be trained and developed just like

the body and the mind, only nobody thinks so; no education is conducted on those lines. And so, though we overstrain the second, and pamper the third, we wholly neglect the first. I imagine that it never occurs to anyone out of the schoolroom to restrain a bad impulse or uproot a bad quality. Why should it? We are all too busy in trying to be amused, and failing. Do you not think it was always so in the world? Do you suppose La Bruyère, for instance, ever turned his microscope on himself? And do you think, if he had done, that any amount of self-scrutiny would have made La Bruyère Pascal or Vincent de Paul?'

'No; but it might have made him comprehend them, or their likenesses. I did not mean to moralise, Madame; I merely meant that the issue of self-analysis is sympathy, whilst the issue of the anatomy of other organisations is cruelty even where it may be wisdom.'

'That may be true in general, and I dare say is so; but the exception proves the rule, and I am the exception. Whenever I do think about myself I only arrive at two conclusions; the one, that I am not as well amused as I ought to be considering the means I have at my disposal, and the other is that, if I were quite sure that anything would amuse me very much, I should sacrifice everything else to enjoy it. Neither of those results is objective in its sympathies; and you would not, I suppose, call either of them moral.'

'I certainly should not,' said Melville, 'except that there is always a certain amount of moral health in any kind of perfect frankness.'

'I am always perfectly frank,' said the Princess Nadine; 'so is Bismarck. But the world has made up its mind that we are both of us always feigning.'

'That is the world's revenge for being ruled by each of you.'

'Is it permitted in these serious days for churchmen to make pretty speeches? I prefer your scoldings, they are more uncommon.'

'The kindness which permits them is uncommon,' said Melville, as he took up his tea-cup.

'Ah! I can be kind,' said Nadine Napraxine. 'Ask Mahmoud and my little dog. But then Mahmoud is dumb, and the dog is—a dog. If humanity were my dog, too, as you say, I should make it *aphone*!'

'Poor humanity!' said Melville, with a sigh. 'If it would not offend you, Princess, there are two lines of Mürger which always seem to me to exactly describe the attitude, or rather the altitude, from which you regard all our sorrows and follies.'

'And they are ——'

'They are those in which he thinks he hears:

> "Le fifre au son aigu railler de violoncelle,
> Qui pleure sous l'archet ses notes de crystal;"

only we must substitute for *aigu* some prettier word, say *perlé*.'

She laughed, thinking of Boris Seliedoff, with more perception of his absurdities than of his offences, as her first movement of wrath subsided into that ironical serenity which was most natural to her of all her varying moods.

'The violoncello does not know itself why it weeps,' she replied, 'so why should the fife not laugh at it? Really, if I were not so impious a being, I would join your Church for the mere pleasure of confessing to you; you have such fine penetration, such delicate suggestion. But then, there is no living being who understands women as a Catholic priest does who is also a man of the world. Adieu! or rather, I hope, *au revoir*. You are going away for Lent? Ours will soon be here. I shock every Russian because I pay no heed to its sanctity. Did you ever find, even amongst your people, any creatures so superstitious in their religion as Russians? Platon is certainly the least moral man the sun shines on, but he would not violate a fast nor neglect a rite to save his life. It is too funny! Myself, I have fish from the Baltic and soups (very nasty ones) from Petersburg, and deem that quite concession enough to Carême. My dear Monsignore, why *should* there be salvation in salmon and sin in a *salmis*?'

Melville was not at all willing to enter on that grave and large question with so incorrigible a mocker. He took his leave, and bowed himself out from her presence; whilst Nadine Napraxine went to her own rooms to dress for dinner and look at the domino which she would wear some hours later at a masked ball which was to take place that night in her own house in celebration of the last evening of the Catholic Carnival.

'Le masque est si charmant que j'ai peur du visage,'

she murmured inconsequently, as she glanced at the elegant disguise and the Venetian costume to be worn beneath it which had been provided for her. 'That is the sort of feeling which one likes to inspire, and which one also prefers to feel. Always the mask, smiling, mysterious, unintelligible, seductive, suggestive of all kinds of unrealised, and therefore of unexhausted pleasures; never the face beneath it, the face which frowns and weeps and shows everything, is unlovely, only just because it is known and must in due time even grow wrinkled and yellow. How agreeable the world would be if no one ever took off their masks or their gloves!'

CHAPTER XXVII.

On the following day as she returned from her drive, she was met, to her great surprise, by Napraxine, who descended the steps of the house with a face unusually pale, and a manner unusually grave

'What can possibly be the matter, Platon?' she said, with a vague sense of alarm, but with her inevitable mockery of him dominating her transient anxiety. 'Have you had a *culotte* yonder? Has Athenais gone away with my jewel-safe? Or have our friends the Nihilists fired Zaraizoff?'

Napraxine gave her his hand to help her to alight.

'Do not jest,' he said simply. 'Boris has shot himself.'

'Boris?—Boris Fédorovitch?'

She spoke in astonishment and anger rather than sorrow: an impatient frown contracted her delicate brows, though she grew ashen pale. Why would men do these things?

Napraxine was silent, but when they had entered the house he spoke very sadly, almost sternly.

'This afternoon he had lost a hundred thousand francs; no doubt on purpose to have an excuse. The ruse can deceive nobody. A Count Seliedoff could lose as much all day for a year, and make no sign. He shot himself in the gardens, within a few yards of us all.'

He paused and looked at his wife. A shadow passed over her face without changing its narcissus-like fairness; she shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly, her eyes had had for a moment an expression of awe and regret, but, beyond any other sentiment with her, were her impatience and irritation.

'Why will men be so stupid?' she thought. 'As if it did any good! The foolish boy!'

'Nadine,' murmured her husband in a voice that was timid even in its expostulation and reproach. 'I am sorry for Boris; for the other I have never cared, but for Boris;—you know that I promised his mother to take what care I could of him—and now—and now—and so young as he was!—and how shall I tell her?—My God!'

She was silent; a genuine pain was on her face, though still mingled with the more personal emotion of impatience and annoyance.

'It was no fault of yours!' she said at last, as she saw two great tears roll down her husband's cheeks.

'Yes, it was,' muttered Platon Napraxine. 'I let him know you.'

The direct accusation banished the softer pain which had for the minute moved her; she was at all times intolerant of censure or of what she resented as a too intimate interference; and here her own surprise at an unlooked-for tragedy, and her own self-consciousness of having been more or less the cause and creatress of it, stung her with an unwelcome and intolerable truth.

'You are insolent,' she said, with the regard which always daunted Napraxine, and made him feel himself an offender against her, even when he was entirely in the right.

'You are insolent,' she repeated. 'Do you mean to insinuate

that I am responsible for Seliedoff's suicide? One would suppose you were a journalist seeking *chantage*!'

The power which she at all times possessed over her husband making him unwilling to irritate, afraid to offend her, and without courage before her slightest sign of anger, rendered him timid now. He hesitated and grew pale, but the great sorrow and repentance which were at work in him gave him more resolution than usual; he was very pale, and the tears rolled down his cheeks unchecked.

'Everyone knows that Boris loved you,' he said, simply. 'All the world knows that; he was a boy, he could not conceal it; I cannot tell what you did to him, but something which broke his heart. You know I never say anything: you give me no title. I am as much of a stranger to you as if we had met yesterday; and do not fancy I am ever—jealous—as men are sometimes. I know you would laugh at me, and besides, you care for none of them any more than you care for me. I should be a fool to wish for more than that;—if it be always like that, I shall never say anything. Only you might have spared this lad. He was so young and my cousin, and the only one left to his mother.'

He paused, in stronger agitation than he cared to allow her to see. It was the first time for years that he had ventured to speak to her in any sort of earnestness or of upbraiding. She had allotted him his share in her life, a very distant one; and he had accepted it without dispute or lament, if not without inward revolt; it was for the first time for years that he presumed to show her he had observed her actions and had disapproved them, to hint that he was not the mere lay figure, the mere good-natured dolt, '*bon comme du pain*,' and as commonplace, which she had always considered him.

She looked at him a little curiously; there was a dangerous irritation in her glance, yet a touch of emotion was visible in her as she said with impatience, 'You are growing theatrical. It does not become you. Boris was a boy, foolish as boys are; he had no mind; he was a mere spoilt child; he was grown up in inches, not in character; so many Russians are. If he have killed himself, who can help it? They should have kept him at home. Why do you play yourself? He is not the first.'

'No, he is not the first,' said Napraxine, with a curt bitterness. 'He is not the first, and it was not play; he only played to have an excuse. He thought of your name, perhaps of mine; he did not wish the world to know he died because you laughed at him.'

'Laughed! I used to laugh; why not? He was amusing before he grew tragical. I rebuked him yesterday, for he deserved it. Everyone scolds boys. It is good for them. No one supposes——' her tone was impatient and contemptuous, but her lips quivered a little; she was sorry that the boy was dead, though she would not say so. It hurt her, though it annoyed her more.

'Did he—did he suffer?' she asked, abruptly.

Napraxine took out of the breast-pocket of his coat a sheet of note-paper, and gave it her.

'He died instantly, if you mean that,' he answered. 'He knew enough to aim well. They brought me that note; he had written it last night, I think.'

In the broad, rude handwriting of the young Seliedoff there was written:—

'Pardonnez-moi, mon cousin: je l'adore, et elle se moque de moi; je ne peux pas vivre, mais j'aurai soin que le monde n'en sache rien. Soignez ma pauvre mère. Tout à vous de cœur

'BORIS FÉDOROVITCH.'

She read it with a mist before her eyes, and gave it back to him without a word.

Napraxine looked at her wistfully; he wondered if he had killed himself whether she would have cared more than she cared now—no, he knew she would have cared as little, even less.

'You say nothing?' he murmured wistfully.

'What is there to say?' she answered. 'It was a boy's blunder. It was a grievous folly. But no one could foresee it.'

'That is all the lament you give him?'

'Would it please you better if I were weeping over his corpse? I regret his death profoundly; but I confess that I am also unspeakably annoyed at it. I detest melodramas. I detest tragedies. The world will say, as you have the good taste to say, that I have been at fault. I am not a coquette, and a reputation of being one gives me no satisfaction. As you justly observed, no one will believe that a Count Seliedoff destroyed his life because he lost money at play. Therefore, they will say, as you have been so good as to say, that the blame lies with me. And such accusations offend me.'

She spoke very quietly, but with a tone which seemed chill as the winter winds of the White Sea, to Napraxine, whose soul was filled with remorse, dismay, and bewildered pain. Then she made him a slight gesture of farewell and left him. As usual, he was entirely right in the reproaches he had made, yet she had had the power to make himself feel at once foolish and at fault, at once coarse and theatrical.

'Poor Boris!' he muttered, as he drew his hand across his wet lashes.

Had it been worth while to die at three-and-twenty years old, in full command of all which the world envies, only to have that cruel sacrifice called a boy's blunder? His heart ached and his thoughts went, he knew not why, to his two young children away in the birch forests by the Black Sea. She would not care any more if she heard on the morrow that they were as dead in their infancy as Boris Seliedoff was in his youth, lying under the aloes and the palms of Monte Carlo in the southern sunshine.

Platon Napraxine was a stupid man, a man not very sensitive

or very tender of feeling, a man who could often console himself with coarse pleasures and purchasable charms for wounds given to his affections or his pride; but he was a man of quick compunction and warm emotions; he felt before the indifference of his wife as though he stretched out his hand to touch a wall of ice, when what he longed for was the sympathetic answering clasp of human fingers. He brushed the unusual moisture from his eyes, and went to fulfil all those innumerable small observances which so environ, embitter, and diminish the dignity of death to the friends of every dead creature.

Meanwhile, Nadine passed on to her own rooms, and let her waiting-woman change her clothes.

A momentary wish, wicked as a venomous snake, and swift as fire, had darted through her thoughts.

'Why had not Othmar died like that? I would have loved his memory all my life!' she thought, with inconsistency.

Though she had almost refused to acknowledge it, the suicide of Seliedoff pained and saddened her. Foremost of all was her irritation that she who disliked tragedies, who abhorred publicity, who disbelieved in passion, should be thus subject to having her name in the mouths of men in connection with a melodrama which, terrible as it was, yet offended her by its vulgarity and its stupidity. The hour and the scene chosen were vulgar; the transparency of the pretext was stupid. It was altogether, as she had said, a boy's blunder—a blunder, frightful, irreparable, with the horror of youth misspent and life self-destroyed upon it—still a blunder. She thought, with impatience, that what they called love was only a spoilt child's whim and passionate outcry which, denied, ended in a child's wild, foolish fit of rage, with no more wisdom in it than the child has.

All Europe would say that, indirectly, she had been the cause of his death; everyone had seen him, moping and miserable, in her rooms the previous day. She disliked a sensational triumph, which was fit for her husband's mistresses, for Lia, for Aurélie, for la belle Fernande. Men were always doing these foolish things for her. She had been angry certainly: who would not have been so? He had been ridiculous, as youth and intense emotion and unreasonable suffering constantly are in the sight of others.

There had been only one man who had not seemed to her absurd when passion had moved him, and that had only been because he had remained master of himself even in his greatest self-abandonment. If it had been Othmar who had been lying dead there with the bullet in his breast, she would have felt—she was not sure what she would have felt—some pleasure, some pain. Instead, he was at Amyôt finding what pleasures he might in a virginal love, like a spring snowdrop, timid and afraid. She, who always analysed her own soul without indulgence or self-delusion, was disgusted at the impulses which moved her now.

'After all,' she thought, 'Goethe was right; we are always capable of crime, even the best of us; only one must be Goethe to be capable of acknowledging that.'

She sat alone awhile, thoughtful and regretful; indisposed to accept the blame of others, yet not unwilling to censure herself if she saw cause. But she saw no cause here; it was no fault of hers if men loved her as she passed by them without seeing they were there. True, she had been annoyed with the youth; she had been irritated by him; she had treated him a little as some women treat a dog,—a smile one day, the whip the next; but she had thought so little about him all the time, except that his high spirits were infectious and his face was boyishly beautiful, and that it had diverted her to annoy Geraldine. But who could have supposed that it would end thus? And amidst her pain and her astonishment was foremost a great irritation at his want of thought for her.

The journals, with their innuendoes, their initials, their transparent mysteries: the condolences and the curiosities of her own society; the reproaches of his family; the long ceremonious Russian mourning and Russian rites—'*Quelle corvée!*' she murmured impatiently, as at some pebble in her embroidered shoe, at some clove of garlic in her delicate dinner.

After all, were the great sorrows of life one-half so unendurable in themselves as the tiresome annoyances with which the foolish habits of men have environed them?

That our friend dies is pain enough, why must we have also the nuisance of following his funeral?

'Men only think of themselves!' she said irritably, in her own unconscious egotism. If Boris Seliedoff had considered her as he should have done, he would not have killed himself within three miles of her garden terrace, at a moment when all their own gossiping world was crowding on the sunny shores of the Mediterranean. A sense of the wrong done to herself divided the regret, tinged almost with remorse, which weighed on her.

As she moved through her boudoir to write the inevitable and most difficult letter which must be penned to his mother far away in the province of the Ekaterinoslaf, a photograph, in a frame of blue plush, caught her eye as it stood amongst all the pretty costly nothings of her writing-table. It was a photograph of Seliedoff; it had been tinted with an artist's skill, and the boyish handsome mouth smiled tenderly and gaily at her.

For almost the first time in her life she felt the tears rise to her eyes. She laid the picture face downward, and wept.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A FEW days later when the remains of Boris Seliedoff had been removed to Russia, there to find their last home in the sombre mausoleum of his family on their vast estates in Ekaterinoslaf, Geraldine, who was one of the few who were admitted to La Jacquemerille in these days of mourning, coming thither one afternoon to find her in the garden alone and to entreat for permission to follow her in the various travels which she was about to undertake, since the Riviera had grown distasteful to her, was accosted by her abruptly, if in her delicate languor she could ever be termed abrupt:

'My dear Ralph,' she said briefly, 'why do you not go home?'

Geraldine drew his breath quickly and stared at her.

'Go home!' he repeated stupidly.

'Well, you have a home; you have several homes,' she said, with her usual impatience at being questioned or misunderstood by wits slower than her own. 'You are an Englishman; you must have a million and one duties. It is utterly wrong to live so much away from your properties. We do it, but I do not think it matters what we do. Whether we be here or there, it is always the stewards who rule everything, but in your country it is different. Your sister says you can do a great deal of good. I cannot imagine what good you should do, but no doubt she knows. I do not like England myself. Your châteaux are very fine, but the life in them is very tiresome. You all eat far too much and far too often, and you have lingering superstitions about Sunday; your women are always three months behind Paris, and never wear shoes like their gowns; your talk is always of games, and shooting, and flat-racing. You are not an amusing people; you never will be. You have too much of the Teuton, and the Hollander, and the Dane in you. Your stage makes one yawn, your books make one sleep, your country-houses make one do both. Your women clothe themselves in Newmarket coats, get red faces, and like to go over wet fields; your men are well built very often, but they move ill; they have no *désinvolture*, they have no charm. The whole thing is tiresome. I shall never willingly go to England; but you, as a great English noble, ought to go there, and stay there——'

'And marry there!' said Geraldine, bitterly. 'Is that the medicine you prescribe for all your friends?'

'Of course you will marry some time,' she said indifferently. 'Men of your position always do; they think they owe it to their country. But whether you marry or not, go home and be useful.

You have idled quite too much time away in following our changes of residence.'

He turned pale, and his eyes grew dark with subdued anger.

'You want to be rid of me!'

'Ah, that is just the kind of rough, rude thing which an Englishman always says. It is the reason why Englishmen do not please women much. No Italian or Frenchman or Russian would make such a stupid, almost brutal, remark as that; he would respect his own dignity and the courtesy of words too greatly.'

'We are unpolished, even at our best; you have told me so fifty times,' he said, sullenly. 'Well, let me be a savage, then, and ask for a savage mercy; a plain answer. You want me away?'

Nadine's eyes grew very cold.

'I never say uncivil things,' she answered, with an accent that was chill as the mistral. 'But since for once you divine one's meaning, I will not deny the accuracy of your divination.'

She blew a little cloud from a tiny cigarette as she paused. She expressed, as clearly as though she had spoken, the fact that her companion was as little to her as that puff of smoke.

'Does sincerity count for nothing?' he muttered stupidly.

'Sincerity!' she echoed. 'Ah! English people always speak as if they had a monopoly of sincerity, like a monopoly of salt or a monopoly of coal! My dear Lord Geraldine, I am not doubting your sincerity in the very least; it is not *that* which is wanting in you——'

'What is?' he asked in desperation.

'So much!' said the Princess Napraxine, with a little comprehensive smile and sigh.

'If you would deign to speak definitely——' he murmured in bitter pain, which he strove clumsily to make into the likeness of serenity and irony.

'Oh, if you wish for details!—It is just that kind of wish for details which shows what you fail in so very much; tact, finesse, observation, flexibility. My dear friend, you are thoroughly insular! Everything is comprised in that!'

He was silent.

'I have not the least wish to vex you,' she continued. 'I am quite sorry to vex you, but if you will press me——A painter teased me the other day to go to his studio and see what he had done for the salon. I made him polite excuses, the weather, my health, my engagements, the usual phrases, but he would not be satisfied with them; he continued to insist, so at last he had the truth. I told him that I detested almost all modern art, and that I did not know why anyone encouraged it at all when it was within everyone's power to have at least line-engravings of the old masters. He was not pleased—take warning. Do not be as stupid as he.'

Geraldine understood, and his tanned cheek grew white with pain. He was a proud man, and had been made vain by his world. He was bitterly and cruelly humbled, but the love he had for her made him almost unconscious of the offence to him, so overwhelming in its cruelty was the sentence of exile which he received.

He did not speak at once, for he could not be sure to command his voice, and he shrank from betraying what he felt. She rose, and threw the cigarette over the balustrade into the sea, and turned to go indoors. She had said what her wishes were, and she expected to have them obeyed without more discussion. But the young man rose too, and barred her way.

He had only one consciousness, that he was on the point of banishment from the only woman whom he had cared for through two whole years. It had become so integral a part of his life that he should follow Nadine Napraxine as the moon follows the earth, that exile from her presence seemed to him the most terrible of disasters, the most unendurable of chastisements.

'After all this time, do you only tell me to go away?' he muttered, conscious of the lameness and impotency of his own words, which might well only move her laughter. But a certain anger rather than amusement was what they stirred in her; there was in them an implied right, an implied reproach, which were both what she was utterly indisposed to admit his title to use.

'All this time!' she echoed; 'all what time? You are leading a very idle life, and all your excellent friends say that you leave many duties neglected; I advise you to return to them.'

'Is it the end of all?' he said, while his lips trembled in his own despite.

'All? All what? The end? No; it is the end to nothing that I know of; I should rather suppose that you would make it the beginning—of a perfectly proper life at home. Evelyn Brancepeth says you ought to reduce all your farmers' rents; go and do it; it will make you popular in your own county. I know you good English always fancy that you can quench revolutions with a little weak tea of that sort. As if people who hate you will not hate you just the same whether they pay you half a guinea, or half a crown, for every sod of ground! Our Tsar Alexander thought the same sort of thing *en grand*, and did it; but it has not answered with him. To be sure, he was even sillier—he expected slaves to be grateful!'

'You really mean that you are tired of my presence?' he said, with no sense of anything except the immense desolation which seemed suddenly to cover all his life.

'You *will* put the dots on all your i's!' she said impatiently. 'That kind of love of explanation is so English; all your political men's time is wasted in it. Nobody in England understands *a demi-mot*, or appreciates the prettiness of a hint.'

I understand well enough—too well,' he muttered, with a sigh that was choked in its birth. 'But—but—I suppose I am a fool; I did not think you really cared much—yet I always fancied—I suppose I had no right—but surely we have been friends at the least?'

His knowledge of the world and of women ought to have stopped the question unuttered; but a great pain, an intense disappointment, had mastered him, and left him with no more tact or wisdom than if he had been a mere lad fresh from college. It cost him much to make his reproach so measured, his words so inoffensive. He began to understand why men had said that Nadine Napraxine was more perilous in her chastity and her spiritual cruelty than the most impassioned Alcina.

She looked at him with a little astonishment mingled with a greater offence.

'Friends? certainly; why not?' she said, with entire indifference. 'Who is talking of enmity? In plain words, since you like them so much, you do—bore me just a little; you are too often here; you have a certain manner in society which might make gossips remark it. You do not seem to comprehend that one may see too much of the most agreeable person under the sun. It is, perhaps, a mistake ever to see much of anyone; at least, I think so. Briefly, I do not wish to have any more stories for Nice and its neighbourhood; this one of Boris Seliedoff is quite enough! They are beginning to give me a kind of reputation of being a *tueuse d'hommes*. It is so vulgar, that kind of thing. They are beginning to call me Marie Stuart; it is absurd, but I do not like that sort of absurdities. I had nothing to do with the folly of poor Boris, but no one will ever believe it; he will always be considered my victim. It is true you are certain not to kill yourself; Englishmen always kill a tiger or a pig if they are unhappy, never themselves. I am not afraid of your doing any kind of harm; you will only go home and see your farmers and please your family; and you will give big breakfasts in uncomfortable tents, and be toasted, and your county newspapers will have all sorts of amiable paragraphs about you, and sometime or other you will marry—why not? Please stand back a little and let me pass; we shall meet in Paris next year when you take a holiday on your reduced rents.'

She laughed a little, for the first time since Seliedoff's suicide; her own words amused her. Those poor English gentlemen, who fancied they would stem the great salt tide of class hatred, the ever-heaving ocean of plebeian envy, by the little paper fence of a reduced rental! Poor Abels, deluding themselves with the idea that they could disarm the jealousy of their Cains with a silver penny!

But the thoughts of Geraldine were far away from any

political ironies with which she might entertain her own discursive mind.

'Nadine, Nadine,' he said stupidly, 'you cannot be so cruel. I have always obeyed you; I have never murmured; I have been like your dog; I have been content on so little. Other men would have rebelled, but I—I——'

Her languid eyes opened widely upon him in haughty surprise and rebuke.

'Now you talk like a *jeune premier* of the Gymnase!' she said, contemptuously. 'Rebelled? Content? What words are those? You have been a pleasant acquaintance—amongst many. You cannot say you have been ever more. If you have begun to misunderstand that, go where you can recover your good sense. I have liked you; so has Prince Napraxine. Do not force us to consider our esteem misplaced.'

She spoke coldly, almost severely; then, with an enchanting smile, she held out her hand.

'Come, we will part friends, though you are disposed to *bouder* like a boy. You know something of the world; learn to look as if you had learned at least its first lesson—good temper. Affect it if you have it not! And—never outstay a welcome!'

He looked at her and his chest heaved with a heavy sigh that was almost a sob. Passionate upbraiding rose to his lips, a thousand reproaches for delusive affabilities, for patiently-endured caprices, for wasted hours and wasted hopes, and wasted energies, all rose to his mouth in hot hard words of senseless, irrepressible pain, but they remained unuttered. He dared not offend her beyond pardon, he dared not exile himself beyond recall. He was conscious of the futility of any reproach which he could bring, of the absence of any title which he could allege. For two years he had been her bondsman, her spaniel, her submissive servant in the full sight of the world, yet looking backward he could not recall any sign or word or glance which could have justified him in the right to call himself her lover. She had accepted his services, permitted his presence—no more; and yet, he felt himself as bitterly wronged, as cruelly deluded, as ever man could have been by woman.

There is a little song which has been given world-wide fame by the sweetest singer of our time: the little song which is called, '*Si vous n'avez rien à me dire.*' Just so vague, and so intense, as is the reproach of the song, was the cry of his heart against her now.

If she had never cared, had never meant, why then——

But he dared not formulate his injury in words; he knew that it would condemn him never to see her face again except in crowds as strangers saw it. He had never really believed that she would care for him as he cared for her, but it had always seemed to him that habit would in the end become affection, that the continual

and familiar intercourse which he had obtained with her would become in time necessary to her, an association, a custom, a friendship not lightly to be discarded. He had believed that patience would do more for him than passion; he had endured all her caprices, followed all her movements, incurred the ridicule of men, and, what was worse, his own self-contempt, in the belief that, with her, *Festina lente* was the sole possible rule of victory. And now she cast him aside, with no more thought than she left to her maids a fan of an old fashion, a glove that had been worn once!

She gave him no time to recover the shock with which he had heard his sentence of exile, but, with a little kindly indifferent gesture, passed him and went into the house.

He had not the courage of Othmar; he had never had as much title as Othmar to deem himself preferred to the multitude; looking back on the two years which he had consecrated to her memory and her service, he could not honestly recall a single word or glance or sign which could have justified him in believing himself betrayed.

She had accepted his homage as she accepted the bouquets which men sent her, to die in masses in her ante-chambers.

His pain was intolerable, his disappointment was altogether out of proportion to the frail, vague hopes which he had cherished; but he felt also that his position was absurd, untenable; he had never been her lover, he had none of the rights of a lover; he was only one of many who had failed to please her, who had unconsciously blundered, who had committed the one unpardonable sin of wearying her.

Resistance could only make him ridiculous in her eyes. She had plainly intimated that she was tired of his acquaintance and companionship. It was an intense suffering to him, but it was not one which he could show to the world, or in which he could seek the world's sympathy. If he had failed to please her—failed, despite all his opportunities, to obtain any hold upon her sympathies—it was such a failure as is only grotesque in the esteem of men, and contemptible in the sight of women.

'*A qui la faute?*' she would have said herself, with a pitiless amusement, which the world would only have echoed.

It was late in February, but already spring in the Riviera; a brilliant sun was dancing on all the million and one pretty things in her boudoir, for she liked light, and could afford, with her exquisite complexion and her flower-like mouth, to laugh at the many less fortunate of her sex, who dared not be seen without all the devices of red glass and rose-coloured transparencies and muffled sunbeams. She caressed her little dog, and bade the negro boy bring her some tea, and stretched herself out on a long low chair with a pleasant sense of freedom from a disagreeable duty done and over.

'I will never be intimate with an Englishman again,' she thought. 'They cannot understand; they think they must be either your Cæsar or *nullus*: it is so stupid; and then, when you are tired, they grumble. Other men say nothing to you, but they fight somebody else—which is so much better. It is only the Englishman who grumbles, and abuses you as if you were the weather!'

The idea amused her.

Through her open windows she could see the sea. She saw the boat of Geraldine, with its red-capped crew pulling straightway to the westward; he was going to his yacht; the affair was over peaceably; he would not kill himself like Seliedoff. Her husband would miss him for a little time, but he was used to men who made themselves his ardent and assiduous friends for a few months or more, and then were no more seen about his house, being banished by her; he was wont to call such victims the Zephyrs after that squadron of the mutinous in the Algerian army, which receives all those condemned and rejected by their chiefs. He would ask no questions; he would understand that his old companion had joined the rest; he had never cared for the fate of any save for that of young Seliedoff. There were always men by the score ready to amuse, distract, and feast with Prince Napraxine.

She drank her yellow tea with its slice of lemon, and enjoyed the unwonted repose of half an hour's solitude. She was conscious at once of a certain relief in the definite exile of her late companion, yet of a certain magnanimity, inasmuch as she would enable other women to presume that he had grown tired of his allegiance.

But the latter consideration weighed little with her; she had been too satiated with triumph not to be indifferent to it, and she was at all times careless of the opinions of others. She would miss him a little, as one misses a well-trained servant, but there would be so many others ready to fill his place. Whenever her groom-of-the-chambers told her hall-porter to say 'Madame reçoit,' her rooms were filled with young men ready to obey her slightest sign or wildest whim as poodles or spaniels those of their masters. There were not a few who, like Geraldine, regulated their seasons and their sojourns by the capricious movements of the Princess Napraxine, as poor benighted shepherds follow the gyrations of an ignis-fatuus. Whether north, south, east, or west, wherever she was momentarily resident, there was always seen her *corps de garde*.

As she sat alone now for the brief half-hour before her usual drive, her past drifted before her recollection in clear colours, as though she were quite old. She remembered her childhood, spent at the embassies of great cities, where her father was the idol of all that was distinguished and of much that was dissolute; the most courtly, the most witty, the most elegant, of great diplo-

matists. She remembered how, sitting in her mother's barouche in the Bois or the Prater, or petted and caressed by sovereigns and statesmen in her mother's drawing-rooms, she had seen so much with her opal-like eyes, heard so much with her sea-shell-like ears, and had, at ten years old, said to Count Platoff, '*Je serai honnête femme; ce sera plus chic*;' and how his peal of laughter had disconcerted her own serious mood and solemnity of resolve. Then she remembered how, when she was seventeen years old, her mother had advised her to marry her cousin; and how her father, when she had been tempted to ask his support of her own adverse wishes, had twisted his silken white moustaches with a little shrug of his shoulders, and had said: 'Mais, mon enfant, je ne sais—nous sommes presque ruinés; ça me plaira—et un mari, c'est si peu de chose!'

'*Si peu de chose*!' she thought, now; and yet a bullet that you drag after you, a note of discord always in your music, a stone in your ball slipper, dance you ever so lightly—an inevitable ennui always awaiting you!

'If they had not been in such haste, I should have met Othmar and have married him!' she mused, with that frankness which was never missing from her self-communion. 'Life would have looked differently;——I would have made him the foremost man in Europe; he has the powers needful, but he has no ambitions; his millions have stifled them.'

She thought, with something that was almost envy, of the fate of Yseulte, and with a remembrance, which was almost disgust, of the early hours of her own marriage, when all the delicacy and purity of her own girlhood had revolted against the brutality of obligations which she had in her ignorance submitted to accept.

How could she care for the children born of that intolerable degradation to which no habit or time had had power to reconcile her?

In her own eyes she had been as much violated as any slave bought in the market.

'If I had daughters, they should at least know to what they surrendered themselves before they were given away in marriage,' she had often reflected, with a bitter remembrance of the absolute innocence in which she herself had repeated the vows, and broken the glass, which had indissolubly united her to her cousin Platon.

Then, with the irony even of herself, and the doubt even of herself, which were stronger than any other instincts in her, she laughed at her own momentary sentiment.

'I dare say I should have been tired of him in six months,' she thought, 'and very likely we should have hated one another in another six. He would not have been as easy as Platon; he would have had his prejudices——'

Before her mind there rose the vision of a place she had once seen as she had sailed in a yacht down the Adriatic one cool

autumnal month; a place not far from Ragusa, somewhat farther to the southward; a fantastic pile, half Greek, half Turkish, with an old Gothic keep built by Quattrocentisto Venetians rising in its midst; gardens of palms and woods of ilex sloping from it to meet the lapis-lazuli-hued sea, cliffs of all the colours of precious stones towering up behind it into the white clouds and the dazzling sunshine. Fascinated by the aspect of the place, she had asked its name and owner, and the Austrians with her had answered her, 'It is called Zama, and it belongs to the Othmars.'

She had often remembered the Herzegovinian castle, lonely as Miramar after the tragedy of Quetaro.

'I would not have lived at Amyôt, but at Zama,' she thought now; then, angry and impatient of herself, she dismissed her fancies as you banish with a light clap of your hands a flock of importunate birds, which fly away as fast as they have come.

CHAPTER XXIX.

'ARE you very happy?' said Baron Fritz to Yseulte in his occasional visits to Amyôt. And she answered without words, with a blush and a smile which were much warmer than words. He saw that she was perfectly happy, as yet; that whatever thorns might be beneath the nuptial couch, they had not touched her.

He did not venture to put the same question to Othmar. There were times when he would no more have interrogated his nephew than he would have put fire to a pile of powder; he had at once the vague fear and the abundant contempt which a thoroughly practical, artificial, and worldly man has for one whose dreams and desires are wholly unintelligible to him.

'Otho,' he said once to her, 'is like an Eastern sorcerer who holds the magic ring with which he can wish for anything under heaven; but, as he cannot command immortality, all his life slips through his fingers before he has decided on what is most worth wishing for. Do you understand?'

Yseulte did not understand; to her this sorcerer, if not benignant to himself, had at least given all her soul desired. He treated her with the most constant tenderness, with the most generous delicacy, with the most solicitous care; if in his love there might be some of the heat of passion, some of the ardours of possession, lacking, it was not the spiritual affection and the childish innocence of so young a girl which could be capable of missing those, or be conscious of their absence. To Yseulte, love was at once a revelation and a profanation: she shrank from it

even whilst she yielded to it; it was not to such a temperament as hers that any lover could ever have seemed cold.

She did not understand her husband; physical familiarity had not brought much mental companionship. She adored him; the distant sound of his step thrilled her with excitement, his lightest touch filled her with delight; the intense love she bore him often held her silent and pale with an excess of emotion which she would have been afraid to render into speech even if she had been able to do so; and she was utterly unable, for the strength of her own feelings alarmed her, and the mode of her education had made her reticent.

He was to her as a god who had suddenly descended upon her life, and changed all its poor, dull pathways into fields of light. That she gave, or that she might give him, much more than he gave her, never occurred to her thoughts. That any ardour of admiration, or force of emotion, might be absent in him towards her, never suggested itself to her. Such love as he bestowed on her, indifferent though it was in reality, seemed to her the very height of passion. She could not tell that mere sensual indulgences mingled with affectionate compassion, may produce so fair a simulacrum of love for awhile that it will deceive alike deceiver and deceived.

Othmar knew that nothing tenderer, purer, or nearer to his ideal, could have come into his life than this graceful and most innocent girl. She satisfied his taste if not his mind; she was as fresh as a sea-shell, as a lily, as a summer-dawn; and he felt an entire and illimitable possession in her such as he had never felt in any living woman; she was so young, it seemed like drinking the very dew of morning; and yet he could not have told whether he was most restless or most in peace at Amyôt.

'Love me a little, dear; I have no one,' he had said to her on the day of their betrothal, and it had always seemed to him that he had no one; all his mistresses had never cared for him, but only for the golden god which was behind him; or, he had thought so. And now, she loved him with an innocence and a fervour of which he could not doubt the truth; and he was grateful, as the masters of the world are usually grateful, for a handful of the simple daily bread of real affection; and she gave him all her young untouched loveliness in pledge of that, as she might have given him a rosebud to pluck to pieces. And he felt the sweetness of the rosebud, he resigned himself to the charm of the dawn, and endeavoured to believe that he was happy; but happiness escaped him as the vermilion hues of the evening sky may escape the dreamer watching for them, who looks too closely or looks too far.

Yet he remained willingly at Amyôt through these winter weeks; as willingly as though he had been the most impassioned of lovers. Amyôt was as far from the world, if he chose, as though its pastures and avenues had been an isle in the great

South Ocean; he wished to forget the world with the ivory arms of Yseulte drawn about his throat: he would gladly have forgotten that any other woman lived beside this child, on whose innocent mouth, sweet as the wild rose in spring, he strove to stay the fleeting fragrance of his own youth.

'No man had ever sweeter physician to his woes,' he thought as he looked at her in her sleep, the red glow from the angry winter sunrise touching with its light the whiteness of her sculptural limbs. But what drug cures for long?

Friederich Othmar often went to the château for a few hours on matters of business, and was persuaded that the shining metal roofs of the great Valois house of pleasure sheltered a perfect contentment.

'But you must not remain for ever here,' he said to his nephew. 'They will give you some foolish name which will run down the boulevards like magic: they will say you are in love with your wife, or that you are educating her; we all know what comes of that latter attempt.'

'I stay at Amyôt,' answered Othmar, 'because I like it, because we both like it.'

'My dear Otho, since you have pleased yourself persistently all your life, it is improbable that you will cease to do so at an age when most men are only just able to begin. Amyôt is an historic place, very old, admirably adapted for a museum; but since it is to your taste, well and good; only none will comprehend that you stay here *filant le parfait amour* for two months. If you continue to do so, Paris will believe that your wife has a club-foot or a crooked spine.'

'You think she must show the one in a cotillon, or the other in something *très collant*?' said Othmar.

'Are you afraid of that?' said the Baron, who knew by what means to attain his own ends.

'I am not in the least afraid,' replied Othmar, with impatience. 'But I confess Amyôt, with the cuckoo crying in its oak woods, seems a fitter atmosphere for her than the *endiablement* of Paris.'

'You could return to the cuckoo. I am not acquainted with his habits, but I should presume he is a stay-at-home, countryfied person.'

'You do not understand the spring-time,' said Othmar, with a smile.

'It has always seemed to me the most uncomfortable period of the year,' confessed the Baron. 'It is an indefinite and transitory period, such as are seldom agreeable, except to poets, who are naturally unstable themselves.'

'I suppose you were never young?' said Othmar, doubtfully.

'I must have been, pathologically speaking,' replied Friederich Othmar. 'But I have no recollection of it; I certainly never remember a time when I did not read of the state of Europe with

interest: I think, on the contrary, there was never a time in which you took any interest in it.'

'Europe is such a very small fraction of such an immeasurable whole!'

'It is our fraction, at least; and all we have,' said the Baron; all the gist of the matter seemed to him to lie in that. 'You would like to live in Venus, or journey to the rings of Saturn, but at present science limits us to Earth.'

'Can you not persuade him to take any interest in mankind?' he continued to Yseulte, as she approached them at that moment. He was about to leave Amyôt after one of his brief and necessary visits, and stood smoking a cigarette before his departure in the great central hall, with its dome painted by Primaticcio.

'In mankind?' she repeated with a smile. 'That is very comprehensive, is it not? I am sure,' she added with hesitation, for she was afraid of offending her husband, 'he is very good to his own people, if you mean that?'

'He does not mean that at all, my dear,' said Othmar. 'He means that I should be very eager to ruin some states and upraise others, that I should foment war and disunion, or uphold anarchy or absolutism, as either best served me, that I should free the hands of one and tie the hands of another; do not trouble your head about these matters, my child; let us go in the woods and look for primroses, which shall remind you of the green lanes of Faïel.'

Yseulte, whose interest was vaguely aroused, looked from one to another.

'If you really can do so much as that,' she said timidly, 'I think I would do it if I were you; because surely you might always serve the right cause and help the weak people.'

Othmar smiled, well pleased.

'My dear Baron, this is not the advocate that you wish to arouse. Remember Mephistopheles failed signally when he entered a cathedral.'

'I do not despair; I shall have Paris on my side,' said the Baron, as he made his farewells.

The day was bright, and a warm wind was stirring amidst the brown buds of the trees and forests; the great forests wore the purple haze of spring; from the terraces of Amyôt, where once Francis and the Marguerite des Marguerites had wandered, the immense view of the valleys of the Loire and of the Cher was outspread in the noon sunlight, white tourelle and grey church spire rising up from amid the lake of golden air like 'silver sails upon a summer sea.' From these stately terraces, raised high on colonnades of marble, with marble statues of mailed men-at-arms standing at intervals adown their length, the eyes could range over all that champaign country which lies open like a chronicle of France to those who have studied her wars and dynasties.

Yseulte loved to come there when the sun was bright as when it was at its setting, and dream her happy dreams, whilst gazing over the undulations of the great forests spreading solemn and hushed and shadowy, away, far away, to the silver line of the vast river and to the confines of what once was Touraine.

'What do you find to think so much of, you, with your short life and your blameless conscience?' asked Othmar that day, looking at her as she leaned against the marble parapet.

She might have answered in one word, 'You,' but love words did not come easily to her lips; she was very shy with him still.

She answered evasively: 'Does one always think at all when one looks, and looks, and looks, idly like this? I do not believe reverie is real thinking; it is an enjoyment; everything is so still, so peaceful, so bright—and then it cannot go away, it is all yours; we may leave it, it cannot leave us.'

'You are very fond of the country?'

'I have never been anywhere else, except when I was a little child in Paris. I love Paris, but it is not like this.'

'No woman lives who does not love Paris; but I think Amyôt suits you better. You have a Valois look; you are of another day than ours. I should not like to see you grow like the women of your time; you are a true patrician—you have no need of *chien*.'

He put a hothouse rose in her bosom as he spoke, and kissed her throat as he did so. The colour flushed there at his touch. She stooped her face over the rose.

'I do not think I shall ever change,' she said, hurriedly. 'It seems to me as if one must remain what one is born.'

'The ivory must; the clay changes,' said Othmar. 'You are very pure ivory, my love. I robbed you from Christ.'

He was seated on one of the marble benches in the balustrade of the terrace; she stood before him, while his hand continued to play with the rose he had put at her breast. She wore a white woollen gown, which fell about her in soft folds, edged with ermine; a broad gold girdle clasped her waist, and old guipure lace covered her heart, which beat warm and high beneath his touch as he set the great crimson rose against it. In an innocent way she suddenly realised her own charm and its power which it gave her over any man; she lost her timidity, and ventured to ask him a question.

'What is it that the Baron wishes you so much to do?' she said, as she stood before him. 'I did not understand.'

'He wishes me, instead of putting roses in your corsage, to busy myself with setting the torch of war to dry places.'

'I do not understand. What is it you can do?'

'I will try and tell you in a few words. There are a few men, dear, who have such an enormous quantity of gold that they can arrange the balance of the world much at pleasure. One man,

called Vanderbilt, could, for instance, make such a country as England bankrupt if he chose, merely by throwing his shares wholesale on the market. The Othmar are such men as this. My forefathers made immense fortunes, mostly very wickedly, and by force of their own unscrupulousness have managed to become one of these powers of the world. I have no such taste for any such power. It is with my indifference that my uncle reproaches me. He thinks that if I bestowed greater attention to the state of Europe I could double the millions I possess. I do not want to do that; I do not care to do that; so a great chasm of difference yawns for ever between him and me.'

'He loves you very much?'

'Oh, in his way: but I irritate him and he irritates me. We have scarcely a point in common.'

'Perhaps,' said Yseulte, amazed at her own boldness in suggesting a fault in him, 'perhaps you have not quite patience with his difference of character?'

'That is very possible,' said Othmar, himself astonished at her insight. 'I could pardon anything if he would not speak of the Othmar as Jews speak of Jehovah. It is so intolerably absurd.'

'But they are your people?'

'Alas! yes. But I despise them; I dislike them. They were intolerably bad men, my dear; they did intolerably bad things. All this,' he continued, with a gesture of his hand towards the mighty building of Amyôt, with its marble terraces and its many towers dazzling in the sunlight, 'they would never have possessed save through hundreds of unscrupulous actions heaped one on the other to make stepping-stones across the salt-marsh of poverty to the yellow sands of fortune. Oh, I do not mean that Amyôt was not bought fairly. It was bought quite fairly, at a very high price, by my great-grandfather, but the wealth which enabled him to buy it was ill-gotten. His father was a common Croat horse-dealer, which is a polite word for horse-stealer, who lived in the last century in the city of Agram. There are millions of loose horses in the vast oak woods of Western Hungary and the immense plains of Croatia, and to this day there are many men who live almost like savages, and steal these half-wild horses as a means of subsistence. There were, of course, many more of these robbers in the last century than in this. Marc Othmar did not actually steal the horses, but he bought them at a tenth part of their value from these rough men of the woods and plains when stolen, and the large profits he made by this illegal traffic laid the foundations of the much-envied fortunes which I enjoy, and which you grace to-day.'

He had spoken as though he explained the matter to a child, but Yseulte's ready imagination supplied the colour to his bare outlines. She was silent, revolving in her thoughts what he had said.

'I would rather your people had been warriors,' she said, with hesitation, thinking of her own long line of crusaders.

'I would rather they had been peasants,' he returned. 'But being what they were, I must bear their burdens.'

'Then what is it he wishes you to do that you do not?'

'He wishes me to have many ambitions, but as I regard it, the fortunes which I have been born to entirely smother ambition; whatever eminence I might achieve, if I did achieve it, would never appear better than so much preference purchased. If I had been as great a soldier as Soult, they would have said I bought my victories. If I had had the talent of Balzac, they would have said I bought the press. If I had written the music of the "Hamlet" or the "Roi de Lahore," they would have said that I bought the whole musical world for my claque. If I could have the life that I should like, I should choose such a life as Lamartine's, but a rival of the Rothschilds cannot be either a poet or a leader of a revolution. The *monstrari digito* ruins the peace and comfort of life: if I walk down the boulevard with the Comte de Paris the fools cry that I wish to crown Philippe VII.; if I speak to M. Wilson in the *foyer* of the Français they scream that there is to be a concession for a new loan; if the Prince Orloff come to breakfast with me a Russian war is suspected, and if Prince Hohenlohe dine with me I have too German a bias. This kind of notoriety is agreeable to my uncle. It makes him feel that he holds the strings of the European puppet show. But to myself it is detestable. To come and go unremarked seems to me the first condition of all for the quiet enjoyment of life, but I have been condemned to be one of those unfortunates who cannot drive a phaeton down to Chantilly without the press and the public becoming nervous about the intentions of M. d'Aumale. Last year, one very hot day, I was passing through Paris, and I asked for a glass of water at a little café at the barrière. They stared, and brought me some. When I told them that I only wanted water, the waiter said, with a smile, "Monsieur ne peut pas être sérieux! nous avons l'honneur de le connaître." The world, like the waiter, will not let me have plain water when I wish for it. I dare say my wish may be perversity, but, at any rate, it is always thwarted by the very people who imagine they are gratifying me with indulgences.'

'But some of the people love you,' she insisted. 'Did not the workmen of Paris give you that beautiful casket the other day? Was it not bought by a two-sous subscription?'

'That was more a compliment to the Maison d'Othmar than to myself. We have always been popular in Paris; so was Louis Napoléon—once. We have much the same titles as he had; we have committed many crimes, and caused immeasurable misery.'

'Not you,' she said, softly.

'I inherit the results,' said her husband.

'But you have done great things,' she said timidly. 'The curé here was telling me yesterday of all you have done for the poor of Paris. He says that the hospitals you have founded, the charities you maintain——'

'The curé knows his way to your heart and your purse! My dear, the Emperor Napoléon Trois thought that he did a great thing for the poor of Paris when he pulled down their rookeries and built them fine and healthy *cités ouvrières*; there was only one thing the Emperor could not do: he could not make the poor live in them; and the Convalescent Home he erected at Vincennes did not save him from Sedan, or Paris from the Commune. We who are rich shall always have the Emperor's fate; we shall build as much as we like, and spend as much as we like, but we shall never reach the hearts of the great multitudes, who all hate us. It is very natural they should. Never say a word about what they call my charities. They are blunders like the Emperor's, many of which seem now to be very absurd ones. If I ever come to my Sedan, they will not be remembered for an hour. The one thing I can do, and will do, is, that I will prevent, as long as I live, the use of the great mill of gold which we grind being turned to immoral purposes—such purposes, for instance, as the oppression of peoples, as the barter of nationalities, as the supply of the sinews of unjust and unholy wars, as the many intolerable iniquities which, whilst professing Christianity, modern statesmen employ under spurious names to most intolerable ends. So much I can do; and, for doing it, I am thought a fool. All the rest is wholly indifferent to me. The machine swings on as it will; it is so admirably organised that it requires little guidance, and that little Baron Friederich gives, whilst I am free, my dear, to stay at Amyôt and gather you another rose, for I have spoilt this one.'

He had spoken more gaily, frankly, and fully than was his wont, and kissed her softly on the throat once more.

Yseulte's thoughts were with his earlier words; her eyes were moist, and very serious. It was the first time that he had ever alluded before to his family or his position; she had never at all understood what they had meant around her when they had spoken of la Finance; she had seen that he was *très grand seigneur*, and was treated, wherever he moved, with the greatest marks of deference. It seemed very strange to her that so much power and state should be possible without unblemished descent: it was outside of her creed and her comprehension. If she had loved him less, it would have shocked her.

'I am sorry,' she said softly, 'it must have troubled you so much. I understand why you are sometimes sad. It must be like holding lightning in your hands; and then there is the fear of using it ill——'

'My greatest fault has been to be too careless of it,' he answered. 'To have used my power neither way, neither for good

nor ill. I have comforted myself that I have done no harm;—a negative praise. Come, let us go and choose another rose for you: or shall we go into the woods? You like them better. Do not trouble your soul with the gold or the crimes of the Othmar. You are come to purify both; and you will make your children in your own likeness out of that consecrated ivory of which Heaven has made you!'

'She is the first woman of them all,' he thought, as they descended the marble stairs towards the glades of the park, 'the first who has had any sympathy with me. They have all thought me a fool for not turning round like the sluggard, and lying drugged in my golden nest. She understands very little because she does not understand the world; but she can imagine how all which the vulgar think so delightful drags me down like a wallet of stones.'

'Yseulte,' he said aloud, 'do you know what all my millions cannot buy, and what I would give them all to be able to buy? Well, something like the *mort sur le champ d'honneur*, which was said for a hundred and fifty years when the name of Philippe de Valogne was called in the roll-call of the Grenadiers.'

The memory he recalled was one of the most glorious of her race; one of those traditions of pure honour which are common enough in the nobility of France. The Counts de Valogne had been behind none in high courage and lofty codes; and the local history of their province was studded with the exploits and the martial self-sacrifice whereby they had continually redeemed their extravagance and their idleness as courtiers and men of pleasure.

She turned to him with her brightest smile, and her hand touched his with a gesture caressing and timid.

'He is mine; I will give him to you,' she said, with a child's abandonment and gaiety. 'I am so glad that I have something to give!'

'You will give his blood to my sons,' said Othmar. 'So you will give it to me.'

CHAPTER XXX.

MELVILLE came one day to Amyôt.

'You have followed my advice,' he said to Othmar. 'You have made yourself a home. It is the nearest likeness to Heaven that men get on earth. Believe a homeless man when he tells you so.'

Othmar smiled.

'It is odd that you, the purest priest I know, and my uncle, the worldiest of philosophers and money-makers, should coincide in your counsels. Perhaps to make a home is as difficult as to

make a discovery in astronomy or mathematics, or to appreciate a sunrise or sunset.'

'Do you mean to say?——'

'I mean to say nothing in especial; except that one's life, as the world goes, does not fit one to be the hourly companion of a perfectly virginal mind. My dear Melville, she makes me ashamed: my society seems infinitely too coarse for her. I have never seemed to myself such a brute.'

'That is, I fear, because you are not very much in love, and so are at liberty to analyse your own sensations: a lover would not feel those scruples,' reflected Melville; but he merely said aloud: 'If a woman have not a little of the angelic, she goes near to having something of the diabolic. Women are always in extremes.'

'Her soul is like a crystal,' said Othmar. 'But in it I see my own soul, and it looks unworthy.'

He could not say even to Melville, tried physician of sick souls as he was, that there were moments when the perfect purity of the young girl wearied him, when her innocent tenderness fretted him, and failed to supply all the stimulant to his senses that women less lovely but more versed in amorous arts could have given, when he was, in a word—the most fatal word love ever hears—wearied.

CHAPTER XXXI.

'*Othmar cueillant les marguerites aux bois!*' said Nadine Napraxine, with her most unkind smile, when she heard that he remained under the Valois woods till autumn.

She herself was in Russia; forced also to gather daisies in her own manner, which always wearied her. It was necessary to be seen awhile at Tsarkoe Selo, or wherever the Imperial people were: and then to visit for a few months the immense estates of Prince Napraxine. They had gone thither earlier than usual through the suicide of Boris Seliedoff, which had cast many noble northern families into mourning, and had for a moment chilled the feeling of Europe in general towards herself.

'It was so inconsiderate of him!' she said more than once. 'Everyone was sure to put it upon me!'

It seemed to her very unjust.

She had been kind to the boy, and then had rebuked him a little as anybody else would have done. Who could imagine that he would blow his brains out under the palms and aloes, like any *décavé* without a franc?

She was exceedingly angry that the world should venture to blame her. When her Imperial mistress, receiving her first visit, gave some expression to this general sentiment, and presumed to

hazard some phrases which suggested a hint of reproof, Nadine Napraxine revolted with all the pride of her temper, and did not scruple to respond to her interlocutor that the Platoff and the Napraxine both were of more ancient lineage and greater traditions in Russia than those now seated on the throne.

To her alone would it have been possible to make such a reply and yet receive condonation of it, as she did. There was in her a force which no one resisted, a magnetism which no one escaped.

She was, however, extremely angered, both by the remarks made to her at Court, and about her in European society, and withdrew herself to the immense solitudes of the province of Kaluga in an irritation which was not without dignity. Men who adored her, of whom there were many, noticed that her self-exile to Zaraïzoff coincided with that of Othmar to Amyôt; but there was no one who would have dared to say so. Geraldine had gone to North America, which had amused her.

'*He* will not shoot himself,' she thought. 'He will shoot a vast number of innocent beasts instead. Seliedoff was the manlier of the two.'

Zaraïzoff was a mighty place set amongst the endless woods and rolling plains of the north-eastern provinces; a huge rambling structure half fortress, half palace, with the village clustering near as in other days when the Tartars might sweep down on it like vultures. The wealth of the Napraxines had made it within almost oriental in its luxury; without, it had much of the barbaric wildness of the country, and it had been here in the first two intolerable years after her marriage that she had learned to love to be drawn by half-wild horses at lightning speed over the snow plains, with the bay of the wolves on the air, and the surety of fatal frost-bite if the furs were incautiously dropped a moment too soon.

At Zaraïzoff, when she established herself there for the summer, she brought usually a Parisian household with her, and inviting a succession of guests, filled with a great movement and gaiety of life the sombre courts, the silent galleries and chambers, the antique walls all covered with vivid paintings like a Byzantine church, the long low salons luxurious as a Persian harem. But this summer it saw her come almost alone. Her children came also from southern Russia, and Platon Napraxine at least was happy.

'Is it possible to be uglier than that; not surely among the Kalmucks!' she thought, looking in the good-tempered little Tartar-like faces of her two small sons.

They were absurdly like their father; but, as they promised to be also, like him, tall and well-built, would probably, as they grew up, find many women, as he had found many, to tell them they were handsome men; but that time was far off, and as yet they were but ugly children. Sachs and Mitz (Alexander and

Demetrius) were respectively five and six years old, big, stout, ungainly little boys, with flat blunt features, in which the Tartar blood of the Napraxine was prominently visible. They had a retinue of tutors, governesses, bonnes, and attendants of all kinds, and had been early impressed with the opinion that a Napraxine had no superior on earth save the Gospodar.

'*Ils ont pris la peine de naître!*' quoted their mother with contempt as she beheld their arrogant little pomposities: she could never forgive them that they had done so. It was natural that when she looked in her mirror she could scarcely bring herself to believe that they had been the issue of her own life.

'I suppose I ought to adore them, but I certainly do not,' she said to Melville, who, having been sent on a mission to Petersburg by the Vatican in the vain hope of mitigating by the charm of his manner the hard fate of the Catholic Poles, had paused for a day at Zaraïzoff to obey the summons of its mistress, travelling some extra thousand versts to do so. It was to him that she had made the remark about the daisies.

Melville, though he was a priest whose vows were truly sacred obligations in his eyes, was also keenly alive to those enjoyments of the graces and luxuries of life which his frequent employment in diplomatic missions for the head of his Church made it not only permissible but desirable for him to indulge in at times. His brief visit to Zaraïzoff, and other similar diversions, were agreeable episodes in months of spiritual effort and very serious intellectual work, and he abandoned himself to the amusement of such occasional rewards with the youthful ardour which sixty years had not tamed in him.

Nadine Napraxine was not only charming to his eyes and taste, as to those of all men, but she interested him with the attraction which a complicated and not-easily-unravelled character possesses for all intellectual people. He had perceived in her those gifts mental and moral which, under suitable circumstances, make the noblest of temperaments, and he also perceived in her an indefinite potentiality for cruelty and for tyranny; the conflict between the two interested him as a psychological study. He could not but censure her intolerance of Napraxine; yet neither could he refuse to sympathise with it. The Prince was the last man on earth to have been able to attain any power over that variable, contemptuous, and subtle temperament and over an intelligence refined by culture to the utmost perfection of taste and hypercriticism of judgment. He adored her indeed, but *c'est le pire défaut* in such cases; and a hippopotamus in his muddy edges might have done so, with as much hope as he, of exciting anything more than her impatience and contempt.

'I certainly do not,' she repeated, as she lay on a divan after dinner, in a grand hall imitated from the Alhambra, with a copy of the Lion fountain in white marble in the centre, and groves of

palms in white marble vases lifting their green banners against the deep glow of the many-coloured fretwork and diapered gold of the walls. 'They are two quite uninteresting children, stupid, obstinate, proud, already convinced that a Prince Napraxine has only to breathe a wish to see it accomplished. At present they are good tempered and are fond of each other, but that will not last long; they will soon feel their claws and use them. They are quite wonderfully ugly;—an ugliness flat, heavy, animal, altogether Tartar. I imagine I could have been fond of a child like any other woman, but then I think with any mother it must be always the child of a man she loves; it must be the symbol of sympathy and the issue of joy——'

She spoke dreamily, almost regretfully, her delicate head lying back amongst the pillows of golden silk, while she sent a little cloud of smoke into the air.

Melville looked at her: he thought that there were persons who were like the Neva river; the Neva does not freeze of itself, but it has so many huge blocks of ice rolled down into it from above that it looks as if it did.

He hesitated a moment; he was too sagacious a man of the world to intrude his own beliefs where they would only have met with unbelief.

'What can I say?' he murmured. 'Only that I suppose maternal love, after all, like all other love, does not come at command; human nature has always been under the illusion that it was a spontaneous and irresistible growth.'

'Human nature has so many illusions,' said Nadine Napraxine. 'But I have never heard that much reason underlies any one of them.'

'But does not our happiness?' said Melville.

She laughed a little.

'Do you believe much in happy people? I think there are passions, vanities, titillations, desires, successes—those one sees in full motion on the earth, like animalculæ in a drop of water; but happiness, I imagine, died with Paul et Virginie, with Chactas and Atala. To be happy, you must be capable of being unhappy. We never reach that point; we are only irritable, or grow *anémique*, according to the variety of our constitutions.'

'I knew a perfectly happy woman once,' said Melville; 'happy all her life, and she lived long.'

'Oh, you mean some nun,' said Nadine Napraxine, with impatience. 'That is not happiness; it is only a form of hysteria or hypogastria.'

'Not a nun,' replied Melville, making himself a cigarette, while the sun played on the red sash of his gown, the gown which Raffael designed for Leo. 'Not a nun. The woman I mean was a servant in a little dirty village near Grenoble; she had been in the service of two cross, miserly people ever since she was fifteen.

At the time I knew her first she was forty-seven. The old people had a small shop of general necessaries; she attended to the shop, cooked, and cleaned, and washed, and spun, dug, too, in a vegetable garden, and took care of a donkey, and pigs, and fowls. When she was about thirty, the old man first, and then the old woman, became incapable, from paralysis. Rose—her name was Rose—worked on harder than ever. She had many offers of better service, even offers of marriage, for she was a famous housewife, but she refused them; she would not leave the old people. They were poor; they had never been good or grateful to her; they had even beaten her when she was a girl; but she would never leave them. She had been a foundling, and theirs had been the only form of human ties that she had ever known. She was perfectly happy all the day long, and she even found time to do many a good turn for neighbours worse off than herself. She had never had more than twenty francs a year in money, but then, "You see, I live well, I want nothing," she said to me once. And such living! Black cabbage and black bread! Well, she was perfectly happy, as I say. You do not seem to believe it?'

'Oh, yes; so is a snail,' said the Princess Nadine. 'Besides, you know, if she had been a pretty woman——'

Melville felt almost angry.

'You are very cruel. Why will you divorce beauty and virtue?'

'I do not divorce them, nature usually does,' she answered, amused. 'Perhaps they divorce themselves. Well, what became of this paragon?'

'She was no paragon,' said Melville, annoyed. 'She was a hard-working, good, honest woman, perfectly content with a horrible lot, and loyal unto death to two tyrannical old brutes who never thanked her. When they died they left all the little they had to a nephew in the Jura, who had taken no notice of them all their days—a rich tradesman. Poor Rose, at fifty-three years old, was sent adrift on the world. She cried her heart out to have to leave the house, and the ass, and the chickens. I got her the grant from the Prix Montyon, and she was set up in a tiny shop of her own in her own village, but she did not live long. "*Quand on a été heureuse, après—c'est long*," she said in her dying hour. She was afraid to seem ungrateful, but "*sans mes vieux*," as she said, apologetically, her life was done. It seems a terrible life to us, but I can solemnly declare that it was one of the few happy ones of which I have ever been witness. There is a sustaining, vivifying force in duty, like the heat of the sun, for those who accept it.'

'For those who accept, no doubt,' said Nadine Napraxine, drily; 'but then, you see, my dear and reverend Melville, it requires some organ in one's brain—superstition, I think, or credulity—before one can do that. Everyone is not blessed with

that organ. Pray believe,' she resumed, with her softer smile, perceiving a vexed shadow on his face, 'I am not insensible to the quiet unconscious heroism of those lowly lives of devotion. They are always touching. Those revelations which the *discours* of the Prix Montyon give from time to time always make one envious of so much belief, of so much endurance, of so much unobtrusive and unselfish goodness. But, though I dare say you will be very angry, I cannot help reminding you that what makes the sparrow very happy would have no sort of effect on the swallow, except that he would feel restless and uncomfortable; and also that—pray forgive me, for you are a priest—to be contented with doing one's duty one must believe in duty as a Divine ordinance. To do that one must have—well, just that bump of credulity of which I spoke—of easy, unquestioning, unintelligent, credulity. Now, that it is a happy quality I am certain, but is it—is it, an intellectual one?'

She spoke very sweetly, but with a demure smile, which made Melville feel that there was a great deal more which she did not say out of respect for his sacred calling and his position as her guest.

'Do not repeat over to me all the stock arguments,' she said quickly, as he opened his lips; 'I have heard them all ten thousand times. I have the greatest possible regard for your doctrines, which have satisfied Chateaubriand, Lacordaire, Montalembert, Manning, Newman, and yourself, but I have always failed to understand how they did satisfy any of you. But we will not discuss theology. Your poor Rose proves, if she prove anything, that Heaven is not in a hurry to reward its servitors. Perhaps, after all, she might have been wiser if she had married some Jeannot, all over flour or coal dust, and had half a dozen children and fifty grandchildren.'

'There is common brute enjoyment all over the earth,' said Melville, almost losing his temper. 'It must be well that it should be leavened here and there with lives of sublime self-sacrifice; one heroic or unselfish act raises the whole of human nature with it.'

Nadine Napraxine took a cigarette.

'There are ten thousand such acts in Russia every year, but they do not produce much effect. Juggernauth rolls on——'

Melville looked at her quickly.

'You have a certain sympathy with the people, though you deride my poor Rose.'

'I do not deride her; I admire her within certain limits. Only, I ascribe her actions more to ignorance and to superstition, whereas you ascribe them entirely to a clear-eyed devotion. Yes; I could have been a revolutionist, I think, only all the traditions of the Platoff and the Napraxine forbid it; and then, as I said to you once before, I do not like *Pallida Mors* carried about in a bat-box or a sardine-case. It is grotesque. Without jesting,' she

continued, 'I think if I saw my way to do something truly great or of lasting benefit, I should be ready to sacrifice my life to it; but there is nothing. If a Princess Napraxine joined the Nihilists, she would only cause an intolerable scandal and set an example which would be very injurious to the country at large. Some day, Russia will be in a revolt from one end to another, but the day is not yet, and I doubt much that any good will be done when it comes. The evil lies too deep, in the drunkenness, in the lying, in the bestiality——'

She saw a look of surprise on Melville's face, and continued quickly:

'Do you suppose I never think? I believe I have read every socialistic writer from Rousseau to Bakounine. They do not convince me of anything except of the utter improbability that any real liberty will ever be obtainable from any congregation of men. Humanity is tyrannical and slavish at once; its governments are created in its own likeness, it makes little difference what they are called, they are human offspring, so they are narrow and arrogant.'

'Poor humanity!' said Melville. 'It is only we priests who can lend it wings.'

'Because you say to it, like Schiller, "Cheat yourself, and dream,"' she replied. 'But even there how narrow still! You say to each unit, "Save yourself!"'

'Well,' said the Englishman with good temper, 'if everyone sweep out his own little chamber, the whole city will be clean.'

'The city will be for ever unclean. You know that as well as I do. Only, all Churchmen can hide their eyes ostrich-like in the sand of sonorous phrases. Your Christianity has been toiling for eighteen centuries, and, one may say, has accomplished nothing. It mouths a great deal, but practical result it has scarcely any. Its difficulty has always been that, being illogical in its essence and traditions, it must be restrained to words. Reduced to practice, all the modern world would fade away, riches would disappear, effort would be impossible, and the whole machinery of civilisation come to a standstill and entire disuse. You are as aware of that as I am, only you do not like to say so.'

She rose, amused at his discomfiture, and lighted another cigarette. She smoked as gracefully as a bird pecks at the dew in a rose.

'She is the only woman who makes me irritable,' the courtly Gervase Melville had once said of her, and he might have said also, 'the only woman who reduces me to silence.'

'Allow, Princess,' he said irritably now, 'that whether we accredit Christianity with it or not, the life of poor Rose in her wooden shoes was much more useful than yours is in those pearl-embroidered *mules*.'

'Ah,' she answered with a smile. 'You are indeed worsted in

your logic if you must descend to personalities! Certainly I grant that; my life is of a most absolute inutility. It is, perhaps, now and then useful to my tailors, because I give them ideas they would not have without me. But to no one else. *À qui la faute?* I arrived in this world without any option. As Mr. Gladstone said when he was an Eton boy, responsibilities which are thrust upon us do not exact our obedience. It is the only sentiment of Mr. Gladstone with which I have ever been able to agree. Life is clearly thrust upon us. We none of us seek it, that is certain. If we are able to disport ourselves in it, like butterflies in a south wind, it says much in praise of the lightness of our hearts.'

'Or of the levity of our consciences,' said Melville, a little gloomily.

'Conscience is only the unconscious cerebral action of transmitted influence, is it? Oh, I have read the Scientists as well as the Socialists. They are not much more convincing, if one goes to them with an unprejudiced mind——'

'Does your conscience never tell you that you have done any harm, Princess?'

'Oh, very often—a great deal,' she answered candidly. 'But it does not tell me that I ought not to have done it. I suppose my chain of transmitted influences is not as strong as it should be. Seriously,' she continued, 'I do not think hereditary influences are nearly sufficiently allowed for at any time. Think what my people were for ages and ages; the most masterful of autocratic lords who had no single law save their own pleasure, and who, when they helped slay a Tzar, were washing out some blood-feud of their family; pleasure, vice, bloodshed, courage no doubt, rough justice perhaps, were all their lives knew; they lived in the saddle or beside the drinking-horn; they rode like madmen; they had huge castles set in almost eternal snows; they were the judge and the executioner of every wrong-doer in their family or their province; it was not until Letters came in with the great Catherine that the least touch of civilisation softened them, and even after Catherine they were amongst the slayers of Paul; for though they could read Bossuet and Marmontel, their culture was but the merest varnish still. Now, I come from these men and women, for the women were not better than the men. Do you suppose their leaven is not in me? Of course it is, though I am—perhaps as civilised as most people.'

Melville looked at her with a smile.

'Yes, certainly civilisation has in you, Princess, reached its most exquisite and most supreme development; the hothouse can do no more. You are its most perfect flower. Are we really to credit that you have beneath all that the ferocity and the despotism of a thousand centuries of barbaric Boyars?'

'I have no doubt something of it,' said Nadine Napraxine, whilst the dark velvet of her eyes grew sombre and her delicate

hand clenched on an imaginary knout. 'I could use *that* sometimes,' she said with significance: Melville understood what she meant.

'You can hurt more than with the knout, Princess,' he answered.

Nadine Napraxine smiled. The suggestion pleased her.

Then a certain regretfulness came upon her face.

'I think I might have been tender-hearted,' she said involuntarily and inconsistently, with a pathos of which she was unconscious. 'I do not know—perhaps not—I am not compassionate.'

She forgot that Melville was seated on a divan near her in the great golden room of Moorish work, whose arches opened on to the marble court of the Lion. She thought of her spoilt, artificial, frivolous childhood, spent in great drawing-rooms listening to political rivalries and calumnious stories and wit that was always polished but not always decent; she thought how her keen eyes had unravelled all the threads of intrigue about her, and how her heart had scorned the duplicity of her mother; when she had been only eight years old, she had known by intuition her mother's secrets and had shut them all up in her little silent soul with vague ideas of honour and dishonour, and never had said anything to her father—never, never—not even when he lay on his deathbed.

And then they had married her to Platon Napraxine as *si bon garçon*. 'Oh, *si bon garçon*, no doubt!' she had thought contemptuously then as she thought now—only he had outraged her, revolted her, disgusted her. Her marriage night still remained to her a memory of ineffaceable loathing.

She looked up to see the intelligent eyes of Melville fixed on her in some perplexity.

She laughed and walked out on to the marble pavement of the great court, above which shone the blue of a northern sky; beyond its colonnades were immense gardens, and beyond those stretched the plains like a green sea covered with forests of birch and willow.

'I think I should have liked to be your Rose,' she said, as she did so. 'After all, she must have been content with herself when she died. A philosopher can be no more.'

'A philosopher can rarely be as much,' said Melville. 'He may be resigned, but resignation and content are as different as a cold hand and a warm one. My poor Rose was certainly content whilst she lived, but not when she died, for she thought she had not done nearly enough in return for all the blessings which she had received throughout her life.'

'Now you cannot get that kind of absurdly grateful feeling without pure ignorance,' said Nadine Napraxine, a little triumphantly. 'It would be impossible for an educated person to think that misery was comfort; so you see, after all, ignorance is at the

bottom of all virtue. Now in your heart of hearts, you cannot deny that, because, though you are a priest, you are beyond anything a man of the world?'

Melville did not dislike to be called a man of the world, for he was one, and liked to prove, or think he proved, that worldly wisdom was not incompatible with the spiritual life.

At that moment Napraxine crossed the court. It was the first of the brief hours between sunset and sunrise; there was a full moon in the midsummer skies; he was smoking a cheroot, and talking with some young men, neighbouring gentlemen, who had dined there; he looked big and coarse, and his face was red; his wife gazed at him with an intolerant dislike; he could have a grand manner when he chose, but in the country he 'let himself go;' he did not remember that he was in the presence of the most inexorable of his critics, of the most implacable of his enemies, of the one person in the whole world whom it would have been most desirable, and was most impossible, for him to propitiate.

'Sachs turned the knife round and round in the wolf's throat; he did, on my honour, while it was alive; we blooded him at five years old, and the child never winked. When the blood splashed him he shouted!' he was saying audibly, with much pride, to one of his guests, as he lounged across the marble court. Sachs was his eldest son. He was relating a hunting exploit, crowned by the presence of his heir.

Nadine glanced at Melville with an expression of sovereign contempt.

'Butchers before they can spell!' she said, with ineffable distaste.

'Shall I venture to say anything?' he murmured.

'It would be of no use. Slaughter is the country gentleman's god. Prince Napraxine is just now wholly *fourré* in his character of a country gentleman. It is perhaps as useful as that of a Monte Carlo gamester. Only here the beasts suffer—there, the fools. I prefer that the fools should do so.'

The young men gathered about her; Napraxine approached Melville.

'How does the Othmar marriage succeed?' he asked. 'I suppose you have seen them?'

'I have been once to Amyôt,' returned Melville. 'You know Amyôt? A magnificent place. They appeared very happy. She seems to have grown years in a month or two.'

'That of course,' said Napraxine, with his loud laugh. 'She is very handsome. Why on earth do they stay on in the provinces?'

'She is fond of Amyôt,' replied Melville. 'Probably he thinks that as she is so young, there is time and to spare for the world.'

'Perhaps Nadine will believe now that it is a love marriage?' insisted her husband, turning towards her.

'Did I ever say it was not?' she replied, with a little yawn.

'I do not see, if it were not, why it should possibly have taken place,' said Melville. 'Othmar is lord of himself.'

'With a slave for his master?' she murmured, too low to be heard by the not quick ears of her husband.

Melville heard, and the doubt crossed him whether Othmar might not have been the lover of the Princess Napraxine, and the marriage arranged by her, as great ladies often arrange such matters to disarm suspicion; for Melville, despite the acumen on which he prided himself, did not by any means wholly understand the very complicated character of his hostess, in which a supreme courage was to the full as strong as were its disdain and its indifference.

She shook off the importunities of the young nobles, who seemed rustic and tiresome enough to a woman to whom the wittiest society of Europe had seemed dull and too tame, and strolled by herself through the half wild gardens, which reached and touched the virgin forests of the East. Her Kossack Hetman, who never lost her from sight when she was out of doors, paced at a respectful distance behind her, but he was no more to her than a big dog would be to others. The high seeding grass which grew in the unused paths screened him from sight.

As she looked back, the moonlit mass of the vast house gathered a dignity and austerity not its own by daylight, but to her it only resembled a prison. She hated it: she would have liked to raze it to the ground and make an end of it. There were so many prisons in Russia!

She laughed a little to herself, not mirthfully, as she strolled through the intense light of the Northern night, her Kossack following like her shadow. A poor drudge like that servant woman in Jura had been content with her life, whilst she, the Princess Napraxine, in all the perfection of youth, beauty, and great rank, was often so dissatisfied with it that she could have drugged herself out of it with morphine from sheer ennui!

What was the use of the highest culture, if that was all it brought you? A whimsical fancy crossed her that she wished her Kossack would try and assassinate her; it would be something new, it might make her life seem worth the having, if somebody would try and take it away. She was only three-and-twenty years old, and her future seemed so immensely long that she felt tired at the very prospect of it, as one feels tired at the sight of a long dull road which one is bound to follow.

The eternal monotony of the great world would be for ever about her. She had too great rank, too great riches, for ambition to present any prizes to her. To attempt to thrust Platon Napraxine into high offices of the State would have been as absurd as to make a bear out of Finland a magistrate or a general. He was a very great noble, but he would never

have wit enough even to play a decent hand at whist, much less to conduct a negotiation or sway a Council.

'One might have had ambition for Othmar,' she thought involuntarily, as his image rose unsummoned from the sea of silvery shadows around her; 'he had none for himself, but he might have been spurred, stimulated, seduced, by a woman he had loved. There would have been many things possible to him; the financier is the king, the Merlin, of the modern world, and might become its Arthur also.'

She thought with impatience of that summer night, as it was shining on the towers and woods of Amyôt. She felt as if something of her own had been stolen from her, some allegiance due to her unlawfully transferred. He should have had patience, he should have waited on her will, he should have accepted her rebuffs, he should have followed her steps through life as the Kossack was following them through the dewy grass.

Poor stupid Geraldine would have been grateful to do so much, or Seliedoff, or so many others. Othmar alone had dared to say to her, 'I will be nothing or all.'

Therefore his memory abided with her and moved her, and had power over her, and at times an irritable gnawing sense of something which might have been stole upon her. What could that child give him at Amyôt?—white limbs, clear eyes, a rose-bloom of blushes; but besides? what sympathy, comprehension, inspiration? what of the higher delights of the passions?

The thought of him irritated her. There was a defiance, an insolence, in his assumption of being able to command his destiny in independence of herself, which offended her; it was unlike what others did. She was aware that it was done out of bravado, or so she believed; but it was not thus that the fates on which she had deigned to lay her finger had usually been closed. Something even of contempt for him at seeking such a refuge from herself mingled with her irritation. It seemed to her weak and commonplace.

'Madame,' said the voice of Melville through the shadows, 'is it quite safe to ramble so late, despite the trusty Kossack and his lance?'

She turned, her head enwrapped in gossamer, till he saw nothing but the cloud of lace and the two dusky, jewel-like eyes.

'I was just wishing, almost wishing,' she answered, 'that the trusty Kossack were of the new doctrines, and would take advantage of the opportunity to make away with his *barina*. I am not sure that I would have called out; it would have saved one a great deal of sameness. When my chocolate comes to my bedside I always think of Pierre Loti's childish protest, "Toujours se lever, toujours se coucher, et toujours manger de la soupe qui n'est pas bonne!" Our soup is good, perhaps. It is rather the appetite which is lacking.'

'Your generation is born tired,' said Melville. 'Mine was happier; it believed in the possibility of enjoyment—an illusion, no doubt, but one which cheers life considerably. Princess, I wish you would pardon me an indiscretion; you are always so merciful to me, you make me over-bold; but I have always so much wanted to know whether a story that I heard, of a winter's journey of yours across Russia, was true. It was in the newspapers, but one never knows what is true there, and I was in India at the time.'

She smiled. 'Oh! I know what you mean. Yes, it was true enough. That was nothing; nothing at all. I had all kinds of people to help me. There was no difficulty of any sort. It was amusing——'

'It was a very heroic thing to do,' said Melville, gravely.

'Not at all,' she interrupted quickly. 'There was no heroism about it. The Tzar was always very kind to me. I had every assistance, every comfort on my journey. You, imaginative being, have a picture instantly in your mind of me as enduring all the dangers of poor Elizabeth in the French classic; on the contrary, I slept nearly all the way, and read a novel the rest.'

'All the same,' said Melville, 'no one but yourself will deny that it was a very noble thing to travel in November, the most hideous part of the year, through mud and snow, right across Russia, to have a few facts reach the Emperor in their true aspect, and then post to Tobolsk with his pardon, that a dying mother might know her son was free before she died——'

Nadine Napraxine shrugged her shoulders slightly, with a gesture of indifference.

'It amused me. I had a fancy to see Siberia in winter. The pity was that Fedor Alexowitch Boganof was an ugly and uninteresting fellow—with plenty of brains, indeed, which brought his ruin, but quite ugly, rather misshapen, and blessed with five children. If the hero of my journey had only been a fine officer of cuirassiers, or a romantic-looking revolutionist, the story would have been delightful, but poor Boganof no one could turn into a *jeune premier*; not even the gossips of Petersburg. He was only a clever writer, with a mother and a wife who idolised him. The truth is, I had read his novel and liked it; that is why, when his people came to me, I did what I could. Anybody who knew the Tzar as well as I could have done as much. As for going to Siberia—well, I went myself because I have a profound distrust of Russian officials. Even an Imperial pardon has a knack of arriving too late when it is desirable that it should do so. It was certainly a disagreeable season of the year, but behind strong horses one does not mind that. Very soon Siberia will have lost its terrors and its romance; there will be a railway across the Urals, and all chance of the little excitements attendant on such a journey as mine will be over. When the Governor saw me

actually in Tobolsk, he could not believe his eyes. If his beard had not been dyed, it would have turned white with the extremity of his amazement. I think he could have understood my taking the trouble if it had been for a Tchin; but for a mere scribbler of books, a mere teller of stories! I told him that Homer, and Ariosto, and Goethe, and ever so many others had been only tellers of stories too, but that produced no impression on him. He was compelled to let Boganof go, because the Tzar ordered him, but he could not see any valid reason why Boganof should not be left to rot away, brain downwards, under the ice.'

She laughed a little at the recollection of it all; it had been called an eccentric hair-brained thing at the time by all her world, but she had taken Boganof back with her in triumph, and had not left him until she had seen him seated by the stove of his own humble house in Odessa.

It had been one of the best moments of her life—yes, certainly—but it did not seem to her that she had done anything remarkable. It had been so absurd to send a man to dwell amidst eternal snows and semi-eternal darkness because he had written a clever novel in which the wiseacres of the third section had seen fit to discover revolutionary doctrines, that when the wife and mother of Boganof, knowing her influence at Court, and having chance of access to her through her steward, threw themselves at her feet one day, and besought her compassion and assistance, she had been surprised into promising her aid, from that generosity and sympathy with courage which always lived beneath the artificiality and indifference of her habits and temper. No doubt they had succeeded because they had come upon her in a *bon moment*; no doubt they might have found her in moods in which they might as well have appealed to the Japanese bronzes in her vestibule; but, having been touched and surprised into a promise, she had kept it through much difficulty and with an energy which bore down all opposition.

'She looks as frail as a reed, but she has the force of a lance, the autocrat to whom she appealed, and who was at the onset utterly opposed to her petition, had thought as he had answered her coldly that Boganof was a dangerous writer.

'So were all the Encyclopædists; but the great Catherine was not afraid of them; will you, the Father of your people, refuse to one of those the protection which she was proud to grant to Frenchmen?' she had said to the Emperor, with many another persuasive and audacious argument, to which he had listened with a smile because the lovely mouth of the Princess Napraxine had spoken them.

'It was a very noble thing to do,' repeated Melville.

'Oh, no,' she also repeated; 'it amused me. It frightened everybody else. The Tzar was at Livadia unusually late; there was first to go to him from here; when I reached Livadia, he was

everything that was kind to me personally, but I found him terribly angered against the poor novelist, and all his courtiers were of course ready to swear that Boganof was Satan; poor innocent Boganof, with his tender heart always aching over the sorrows of the poor, and the mysteries of animal suffering! I told the Emperor that Boganof was, on the contrary, a type of all that was best in the Russian people; of that obedience, of that faith, of that fortitude, which the Russian possesses in a stronger degree than any other of the races of man. Where will you find as you find in Russia the heroic silence under torture, the unwavering adherence to a lost cause, the power of dying mute for sake of an idea, the uncomplaining surrender of youth, of beauty, of all enjoyment, often of rank and riches, to a mere impersonal duty? They are all sacrificed to dreams, it is true; but they are heroic dreams which have a greatness that looks fine in them, beside the vulgar greeds, and the vulgar content of ordinary life. I said something to that effect to the Tzar. "You fill your mines and prisons, sir, with these people," I said to him. "Greece would have raised altars to them. They are the brothers of Harmodius; they are the sisters of Læna." I suppose it is wonderful that he did not send me to the prisons; I dare say, if I had been an ugly woman he would have done; he was, on the contrary, very indulgent, and, though he was hard to move at first, he ended with the utmost leniency.

'I was really quite in earnest at the time,' she continued now, with a little wondering astonishment at such remembrances of herself. 'I urged on the Tzar the truth that, when the intellect of a nation is suppressed and persecuted, the nation "dies from the top," like Swift. I think I convinced him for the moment, but then there were so many other people always at his ear to persuade him that universal convulsion was only to be avoided by corking all the inkbottles, and putting all the writers and readers down the mines. Prince Napraxine, by the way, was in a terrible state when he heard of it all. He was away in Paris at the time, and you may imagine that I did not telegraph to ask his consent. Indeed, he first learnt what I had done from the Russian correspondent of *Figaro*, and took the whole story for one of *Figaro's* impudent fictions. He went to the bureau in a towering rage, and, I think, broke a Malacca cane over a sub-editor. Then he telegraphed to me, and found it was all true enough; he might more wisely have telegraphed first, for the sub-editor brought an action for assault against him, and he had a vast deal of money to pay. He abhors the very name of Boganof. Last New Year's Day I had all Boganof's novels in the Russian text, bound in vellum, as a present from him; I thought he would have had an apoplectic fit.'

Her pretty, chill laughter completed the sentence.

'My honesty, however, compels me to confess,' she continued, 'that for an unheroic *boulevardier* and a strongly conservative

tchin like my husband, the position was a trying one. He abhors literature, liberal doctrines, and newspaper publicity; and the story of my journey for and with Boganof met him in every journal, in every club, in every city of Europe. The publicity annoyed me myself very much. I think the way in which journalists seize on everything and exaggerate it to their own purposes will, in time, prevent any action, a little out of the common, ever taking place at all. People will shut themselves up in their own shells like oysters. I should have left Boganof to the governor of Tobolsk, who was so anxious to keep him, if I had ever foreseen the annoyance which the Press was destined to cause me about him. When I met the Tzar afterwards he said, "Well, Princess, are you still convinced now that the ink-bottle contains the most harmless and holy of fluids?" and I answered him that I granted it might contain a good deal of gas and a good deal of gall, yet still I thought it wiser not to cork it.'

'Princess,' said Melville, with a little hesitation, 'one cannot but regret that a person capable of such fine sympathy and such noble effort as yourself should pass nearly the whole of her time in sedulously endeavouring to persuade the world that she has no heart and herself that she has no soul. Why do you do it?'

She gave a little contemptuous gesture. 'I do not believe I have either,' she said. 'When I was a tiny child, my father said to me, "Douchka, you will have no dower, but you will have plenty of wit, two big eyes, and a white skin." The possession of these three things has always been the only fact I have ever been sure of, really! Do not begin to talk theologically; you are delightful as a man of the world, but as a priest you would bore me infinitely. One thinks out all that sort of thing for oneself: ostensibly, I am of the Greek Church; actually, I am of Victor Hugo's creed, which has never been able to find a key to the mystery of the universe, "*Quelle loi a donné la bête effarée à l'homme cruel?*" The horse strains and shivers under the whip, the brutal drunkard kicks him in his empty stomach: God looks on, if He exist at all, in entire indifference throughout tens of thousands of ages. You say the patient animal has no soul, and that the sodden drunkard has one. I do not admire your religion, which enables you placidly to accept such an absurdity, and such an injustice, as a Divine creation. Do not say that poets do no good; they do more than priests, my dear friend. I had been reading that poem of Hugo's, the *Melancholia*, at the moment when Boganof's wife and mother brought their petition to me. It had made me in a mood for pity. You know that is the utmost a woman ever has of any goodness—a mere mood. It is why we are so dangerous in revolutions: we slay one minute, and weep the next, and dance the next, and are sincere enough in it all. If they had come to me when I had been annoyed about anything, or when I had had a toilette I disliked, or a visit that had wearied me, I should have

said "No," and left Boganof in Siberia. It was the merest chance, the merest whim—all due to the *Melancholia*.'

'Whim, or will, I am sure Boganof was grateful?' asked Melville.

Her voice softened: 'Oh, yes, poor soul! but he died six months afterwards of tubercular consumption, brought on by exposure and bad food in Siberia. You see, imperial pardons may arrive too late, even if one carry them oneself!'

'But he died at home,' said Melville; 'think how much that is!'

'For the sentimentalists,' she added, with her cruel little smile, but her eyes were dim as she glanced upward at the stars in the north.

'Poor Boganof!' she said, after a pause, with a vibration of unresisted emotion in her voice. 'There is another problem to set beside your Rose. The world is full of them. Your Christianity does not explain them. He was the son of a country proprietor, a poor one, but he had a little estate, enough for his wants. He was a man of most simple tastes and innocent desires: he might have lived, as Tourguenieff might have lived, happy all his humble days on his own lands; but he had genius, or something near it. He believed in his country and in mankind; he had passionate hopes and passionate faiths; he knew he would lose all for saying the truth as he saw it, but he could not help it; the truth in him was stronger than he, he could not restrain the fire that was in him—a holy fire, pure of all personal greed. Well, he has died for being so simple, being so loyal, being so impersonal and so unselfish. If he had been an egotist, a time-server, a sycophant, he would have lived in peace and riches. Your Christianity has no explanation of that! Musset's "*être immobile qui regarde mourir*" is all we see behind the eternal spectacle of useless suffering and unavailing loss.'

She turned and drew her laces closer about her head, and passed quickly through the shadows to the house.

Melville in answer sighed.

That night, when Melville stood at his windows looking over the immense flat landscape, green with waving corn and rolling grass lands and low birch woods which stretched before him silvered by the effulgence of a broad white moon, he thought of Nadine Napraxine curiously, wistfully, wonderingly, as a man who plays chess well puzzles over some chess problem that is too intricate for him. The explanation we give of ourselves is rarely accepted by others, and he did not accept hers of herself; that she was the creature of the impression of the moment. It seemed to him rather that hers was a nature with noble and heroic impulses crusted over by the habits of the world and veiled by the assumption rather than the actuality of egotism. She, too, could have been a sister of Læna, he thought.

What waste was here of a fine nature, sedulously forcing itself and others to believe that it was worthless, wearied by the pleasures which yet made its only kingdom, cynical, lonely, incredulous, whilst at the height of youth and of all possession!

CHAPTER XXXII.

OTHMAR, faithful to his word, remained at the château of Amyôt throughout the spring and summer months, indifferent to the laughter of the world, if it did laugh. He divined very accurately that one person at least laughed and made many a satiric sketch to her friends of himself *filant le parfait amour*, and gathering wood violets, wood anemones, wood strawberries, beneath the shadows of his Valois trees in glades which had been old when the original of Jean Goujon's Diane Chasseresse had been young.

Amyôt seemed to him to suit the youth, the grace, and the gravity of Yseulte better than any babble of the great world;—Amyôt, which was like a stately illuminated chronicle of kingly and knightly history, which was as silent as the grave of a king in a crypt, and which was shut out from the fret of mankind by the screen of its Merovingian forests.

He was scarcely conscious that he lingered in this seclusion from an unacknowledged unwillingness to go where he would see and hear of another woman; he persuaded himself that he chose to stay on in the provinces partially because the tumult of the world was always vulgar, noisy, and offensive to him, chiefly because nowhere else in the world so surely as in one of his own country houses could he be certain not to meet the woman who had wounded him mortally, yet whom he loved far more than he hated her.

'It is absolutely necessary that you should be seen in Paris, and that you should receive there; it is absolutely necessary that you should sustain your position in the world,' said Friederich Otnmar, with much emphasis as he sat at noon one day on the great terrace of Amyôt. Othmar laughed a little, and shrugged his shoulders.

'Amyôt is magnificently kept up—that I admit,' continued the elder man. 'It is a place that it is well to have, to spend six weeks of the autumn in, to entertain princes at; it is quite royal, and was one of the best purchases that my father ever made. But to bury yourself here!—when the Kaiser comes to Paris, to whom you owe by tradition every courtesy——'

'The Othmars were never received at the Court of Vienna.'

The Baron made an impatient gesture.

'We are Parisians, but we are Croats before all. Sometimes

you are pleased to insist very strongly that we are Croats, and nothing else. If we are so, the Emperor is our sovereign.'

'It is disputed in Croatia, which has never been too loyal!'

'Croatia be——,' said Friederich Othmar, with difficulty restraining the oath because Yseulte was seated within hearing; and he returned to his old arguments, which were all brought to bear upon the fact that at the approach of winter Othmar owed it as a duty to society and to himself to throw open the doors of that vast hotel on the Boulevard St.-Germain, which had always seemed to him the most hateful embodiment of the wealth, the unscrupulousness, and the past history of his race.

The hotel had been purchased from the Duc de Coigny during the White Terror by Marc Othmar for a nominal price; and under the reign of Louis Philippe, Stefan Othmar, deeming it neither grand nor luxurious enough, had had it changed and redecorated in the worst taste of the epoch, and, in the early days of the Second Empire, had farther enlarged and overloaded it, until to his son it was as a very nightmare of gilding, marble, and allegorical painting, a Cretan labyrinth of enormous and uninhabitable chambers, fit for such motley crowds as cram the Elysée in the days of Grévy.

It was one of the show-houses of Paris, and had, indeed, many real treasures of art amidst its overloaded luxury, but Othmar hated it in its entirety, from its *porte-cochère*, where the arms which the heralds had found for Marc Othmar had replaced the shield and crown of the Ducs de Coigny, to the immense library, which did not contain a single volume that he cared to open; an 'upholsterer's library,' with all its books, from Tacitus to Henri Martin, clad in the same livery of vellum and tooled gold.

'Absolutely necessary to sustain your position in the world!' repeated Othmar when his uncle had left him. 'That is always the incantation with which the fetish of the world obtains its sacrifices. Translated into common language, he means that as I have a great deal of money, other people expect me to spend much of it upon them. I do not see the obligation, at least not socially.'

'Do you desire the life of Paris?' he added abruptly to Yseulte, who hesitated, coloured slightly, and said with timidity:

'I should prefer S. Pharamond.'

'S. Pharamond is yours,' said Othmar with some embarrassment, knowing why every rood of that sunny and flowering shore seemed to him nauseous with sickening memories. 'S. Pharamond is yours, my dear; but I scarcely think that we can pass this winter there. There are tedious duties from which we cannot escape; to entertain in Paris is one of them.'

An older woman would have perceived that he contradicted himself, but Yseulte was blinded to such anomalies by her adora-

tion of him; an adoration as intense as it was meek, dumb, and most humble.

'I am so perfectly happy here,' she answered, with hesitation; 'but——'

She was not actuated by the sentiment which he attributed to her hesitation; she infinitely preferred the country to the city, as all meditative and poetic tempers do, and the little she had seen of the great world at Millo made her dread her entry into it in Paris. What she wished, but lacked the courage to say, was, that she perceived that the country did not satisfy him himself. She was not so dull of comprehension that she did not see the melancholy of her husband, the listless indifference, the unspoken ennui, which spoiled his years to him, and left him without energy or interest in life. She could discern the wound she knew not how to cure, and Friederich Othmar in his conversations with her had repeatedly assured her that the *vie de province* stifled the intelligence of a man as moss grows over the trunk of a tree.

'I am so happy here,' she answered now with hesitation, 'but still——'

'But still you are a daughter of Eve,' he added with indulgence. 'My poor child, it is quite natural, you are so young; all young girls long for the life of the world. It robs them of their lilies and roses, it draws bistre shadows under their eyes, it makes them old before they are twenty, but still they kiss the feet of their Moloch! I do not think, though, that you will ever be hurt by the world yourself. You are too serious, and have at once too much humility and too much pride: they are safe warders at the door of the soul; you will not easily become a *mondaine*.'

'What is the difference?'

'In the world, when she belongs to it, a woman crushes her soul as she crushes her waist; she is a butterfly, with the sting of an asp; she wastes her brain in the council-chambers of her tailors, and her time in a kaleidoscope of amusements that do not even amuse her; she would easily make the most hideous thing beautiful if she put it on once, and the most flagrant vice the fashion if she adopted it for a week; she has given the highest culture possible to her body and to her brain, only to spend her years in an ennui and an irritation beside which the life of the South Sea islanders would seem utility and wisdom; she has the clearest vision, the finest intelligence, the shrewdest wit, only to set her ambition on having a whole audience of a theatre forget the stage because she has entered her box, or the entire journals of a city chronicle the suicide of some madman who has taken his life because she crossed out his name on her tablets before a cotillon——'

He paused abruptly, becoming suddenly conscious that he was speaking in no general terms, and had only before his thoughts the vision of one woman.

'No, my dear,' he said kindly, passing his hand over the shining tresses of Yseulte; 'I am not afraid that you will become a coquette or a lover of folly; you will not learn the slang of the hour, or yellow your white skin with *maquillage*; you will always be the young patrician of the time of the Lady of Beaujeu. You shall go to Paris if you wish, and do just what you like there; you must not blame me if it does not suit you better than it suits those roses which your foster-mother sends up in moss from her garden.'

'Poor child!' he thought, with a pang of conscience. 'She has a right to enjoy any amusement she can. She is young; the world will be a play-place to her; if she can make for herself friends, interests, pastimes, I should be the last to prevent her. Sooner or later she will find out that she is so little to me. She is content now because she takes kindness for love, and because, in her innocence, she cannot conceive how one's senses may be roused while one's heart may lie dumb and cold as a stone. But when she is older she will perceive all that, and then the more friends she has found, and the less she leans on me, the less unhappy will she be. I will give her everything that she can wish for; all women grow contented and absorbed in the world.'

So he argued with himself, but he knew all the while that he was to blame in desiring that sort of compensation and consolation for her; and that delicacy of taste, which has over some temperaments a stronger control than conscience, made him feel that there was a kind of vulgarity in thus persuading himself that material gifts and material triumphs would atone to her for the indifference of his feelings and the absence of his sympathy.

It was something better than mere material possessions and indulgence which he had meant to give the child whose lonely fate had touched him to so much pity under the palm trees of S. Pharamond and the gilded roofs of Millo. But he dismissed the rebuke of this memory with impatience. The world had so repeatedly told him that his gold was capable of purchasing heaven and earth, that, though he found it of no avail for himself, he fell instinctively into the error of imagining that with it at least he could heal all wounds not his own. She should have all her fancy could desire. His experience of women told him that she would be very unlike them if, in all the pleasure of acquisition, emulation, and possession, she did not find at least a fair simulacrum of happiness. She would be one out of a million—but if she were that one? Then her soul might starve in the midst of all her luxuries and pageants, like a bird in a golden cage that dies for want of the drop of water which the common brown sparrow, flying over the ploughed brown field, can find at will. But he did not think of that.

He knew that it was unworthy to speculate upon the power of the lower life to absorb into itself a soul fitted by its affinities to

discover and enjoy the higher. He shrank from his own speculations as to the possibility of the world replacing himself in her affections. He had honestly intended, when he had taken her existence into his charge, to study, reverence, and guide this most innocent and docile nature; and endeavour, beside her, to seek out some trace of the purer ideals which had haunted his youth. And he felt, with remorse, that the failure to do so lay with himself, not with her. She remained outside his life; she had no sorcery for him. She was a lovely and almost faultless creature, but she was not what he loved. He realised, with bitter self-reproach, that in a moment of impulse, not ignoble in itself, but unwise, he had burdened his own fate and perhaps unconsciously done a great wrong to her, since, in the years to come, she would ask at his hands the bread of life and he would only be able to give her a stone.

She herself had as yet no idea that she was not beloved by Othmar with a lover's love. She knew nothing of men and their passions. She had not the grosser intuitions which could have supplied the place of experience. She did not perceive that his tenderness had little ardour, his embraces nothing of the fervour and the eagerness of delighted possession. She had no standard of comparison by which to measure the coldness or the warmth of the desires to which she surrendered herself, and it was not to so spiritual a temperament as hers that the familiarities of love could ever have seemed cold. But her nerves were sensitive, her perceptions quick; and they made her conscious that mentally and in feeling Othmar was altogether apart from her; that in sorrow she would not have consoled him, and that in his meditations she never had any place.

'When I am older he will trust me more,' she reflected, in her innocence, and she had been so long used to repression and obedience that it cost her much less than it would have cost most women of her years to accept, uncomplainingly, that humble place before the shut doors of his life.

She was too modest to be offended at a distraction which would have been certain to excite the offence and the suspicion of a more selfish or self-conscious nature; and she was too young to be likely to penetrate by intuition the secret of that evident joylessness which might well have excited her jealousy. It was rather the same sense of pity which had come to her for him in the weeks before her marriage which grew strongest in her as the months passed on at Amyôt. He enjoyed and possessed so much, yet could not enjoy or possess his own soul in peace.

'I do not think he is happy, and it is not I who can make him happy,' she said once, very timidly, to Friederich Othmar, who answered with considerable impatience:

'My love, the fault does not lie with you. Otho, who believes himself, like Hamlet, out of joint with his time, is in reality a

man of his times in everything; that is, he is a pessimist; he has a mental nevrose, to borrow the jargon of scientists; he has so cultivated his conscience at the expense of his reason, that I sometimes believe he will be satisfied with nothing but the abandonment of all he possesses; and no doubt he would have tried this remedy long since, only he has no belief in any Deity who would reward him for it. The misfortune of all the thoughtful men of Otho's generation is, that they combine with their fretful consciences an entire disbelief in their souls, so that they are a mass of irritable anomalies. The mirthful sceptics of Augustan Rome, of Voltairian France, and of Bolingbroke's England, were all consistent philosophers and voluptuaries; they disbelieved in their souls, but they believed in their bodies, and were amply content with them. They never talked nonsense about duty, and they passed gaily, gracefully, and consistently through their lives, of which they made the best they could materially, which is only reasonable in those who are convinced that the present is the sole sentient existence they will ever enjoy. But the tender-nerved pessimists of Otho's kind and age are wholly inconsistent. They believe in nothing, and yet they are troubled by a multitude of misgivings; they think the soul is merely a romantic word for the reflex action of the brain, and yet they distress themselves with imagining that the human animal has innumerable duties, and should have innumerable scruples, which is ridiculous on the face of it, for, religion apart and Deity denied, there is no possible reason why man should have any more duties than a snail has, or a hare. The agnostics of the present generation do not perceive this contradiction in themselves, and that is why they look so inconsistent and so entirely valetudinarian beside the robust Atheism of the past century, and are, indeed, the mere *malades imaginaires* of the moral hospital.'

'If I could only make him as happy as I am myself,' she said again; but she had not the talisman which the woman who is beloved in return holds in the hollow of her hand.

'She is too young,' thought Friederich Othmar, angrily. 'She is too innocent; she is a daisy, a dove, a child. She knows nothing of persuasion or provocation; she is not even aware of her own charms. She waits his pleasure to be caressed or let alone; she knows neither how to deny herself or make herself desired. She wearies him only because she does not know how to torment him. He will drift away to someone else who does, while he will expect her—at seventeen!—to be satisfied with bearing him children and owning his name!'

A few months before, the Baron himself would have emphatically declared that no living woman could or should ever need more. But his nephew's wife had touched a softer nerve in him; something which was almost tenderness and almost regret smote him when he saw the tall, graceful form of Yseulte like a garden lily,

standing alone in the warmth of the sunset on the terraces at Amyôt, or saw Othmar, when he approached after a day's absence, kiss her hand with the calm and serious courtesy which he would have displayed to any stranger, and turn away from her with an indifference which all his deference of manner and careful *prévoyance* of thought for her could not conceal from the keen eyes of the elder man.

'He gives her his caresses, not his companionship,' thought the old man, angrily, but he was too prudent and too wise to draw her attention to a fault against herself of which she was unconscious.

A few months earlier he would have said with Napoléon, '*Qu'elle nous donne des marmots: c'est le nécessaire.*' But before this young mistress of this stately place as she moved, in her white gown, with her great bouquet of roses in her hand and her clear eyes smiling gravely on these men who so brief a while before had been unknown to her, and now held all her destiny in their hands, Friederich Othmar for the first time in his life saw a little way into a soul unsoiled, and began to dimly comprehend some desires not wholly physical, some necessities sheerly of the mind and heart. The impression came to him—a purely sentimental one, for which he chid himself—that this child was entirely alone; more alone in her wedded life perhaps than she would have been in the monastic. She was surrounded with every species of material indulgence; day after day her husband gave her new pleasures, as people give children new toys; if she had wished for the impossible he would have endeavoured to obtain it for her; but Friederich Othmar twice or thrice in his hurried visits to Amyôt had found her in solitude, and walking alone in the stately gardens or sitting alone in some little rustic temple in the woods, and the fact, though insignificant enough, seemed to him indicative of a loneliness which would certainly become her fate unless she learned, as so many other women have learned, to console herself for neglect by folly.

'And that she will not do,' the old man said to himself. 'She is a pearl; but a pearl thrown, not before swine, but wasted on a pessimist, an *ennuyé*, a *délicat* whom nothing pleases except that which he cannot possess.'

He pitied her for what he foresaw would befall her in the future, rather than for anything which troubled her at that present time, for although vaguely conscious of a certain discordance and dissatisfaction in her husband's life, Yseulte was, in her own, as happy as a very young girl can be to whom kindliness seems love and the external beauty surrounding her appears like a lovely dream.

Othmar left her often to shut himself in his library, to lose himself in his forests, or to go for the affairs of his House to Paris; but he was always gentle, generous, and kind; he was even pro-

digal of caresses to her, because they spared him words in whose utterance he felt himself untrue; and if the reflex of his own sadness fell at times across herself, it became a light soft shadow without name, such as seemed to suit better than mere vulgar joys the silence of the gardens and the grandeur of the courts, where a life of the past, once so gracious, so vivid, so impassioned in love and so light in laughter, had been extinguished like a torch burned out in the night. A riotous or exuberant happiness would not have so well pleased her nature, made serious beyond her years whilst yet so mere a child, by the pains of poverty, the companionship of old age, and the sights and sounds of the siege of Paris. The long, light, warm days of spring and summer at Amyôt, with all the floral pomp around her, and the château itself rising, golden and silvery in the brilliant air, historic, poetic, magnificent, airy as a madrigal, martial as an epic, were days of an ecstatic but of an almost religious joy to her.

'What have I done that all this should come to me?' she said often in her wonder and humility, and Othmar seemed ever to her as a magician, at whose touch the briars and brambles in her path had blossomed like the almond and the may.

CHAPTER XXXII.

With October days an accident as her boat crossed the Loire water, when the autumn currents were rolling strong and wide, brought on the premature delivery of a child, who barely breathed for a few moments, and then took with him into darkness the hopes of the Maison d'Othmar. The fury and the grief of Friederich Othmar were so great that they far surpassed the moderate regret shown by his nephew, who appeared to him intolerably cold and little moved save by his sympathy with the sorrow of the child's young mother.

'You would care, I believe, nothing if there were no one to succeed you when you die!' said the elder man with indignation.

Othmar gave a gesture of indifference.

'I hope I should care for my sons as much as most men care for theirs,' he replied. 'But the "succession" does not seem to me to be of vital importance. If you would only believe it, we are not Hohenzollerns nor Guelfs, and even they would be easily replaced, though perhaps Moltke or Wolseley would not be so.'

'Why do I, indeed, care so little?' said Othmar to himself when he was alone. 'I am neither inhuman nor heartless. I used to be quickly touched to any kind of feeling; but the whole of life seems cold to me, and profitless. I was dry-eyed whilst that

poor child wept over that little, frail, waxen body which was so much to her; would have been so much to her if it had lived to lie on her breast. It is the most pathetic of all possible things—a girl still sixteen sorrowing for her offspring which has perished before it had any separate existence; has died before it lived; and yet, I feel hardly more than if I had seen a bird flying round an empty nest, or a brood of leverets wailing in an empty form. I think she took my heart out of my chest that day she fooled me, and put a stone there——'

He meant Nadine Napraxine, who remained the one woman on the earth for him.

A woman of unstable impulses, of incalculable caprices, of an infinite intelligence, of as infinite an egotism; absorbed in herself, save so far as her merciless eyes scanned the whole world as players, whilst her fastidious taste found them the poorest players, and judged them inexorably as dunces and as fools; a woman who had treated the tragedy of his own passion as a mere comedy, and had listened to it seriously for a moment only the better to turn it into jest.

Yet the one woman upon earth whom he adored, whom he desired.

For love is fate, and will neither be commanded nor gainsaid.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

When Yseulte had recovered enough to travel, he took her to the Italian lakes for awhile, to restore her to her usual health and strength, and distract her thoughts from what had befallen her at Amyôt. With the beginning of winter they returned, and made their home for awhile in the great hotel of the Boulevard St.-Germain, which he hated, and where he intended to remain for the briefest time that could suffice for the fulfilment of those social duties of which Friederich Othmar never ceased to remind him. There his mother's apartments had been prepared for his wife, and every grace and attraction that the art and the taste of the day could add to them had been added, as though the most solicitous affection had presided over the preparation of them. All the preferences she had shown in the country had been remembered and gratified; whatever she had liked best in colour, in treatment, in art, in flowers, in marble, had been consulted or reproduced in Paris; and even a large dog to which she had taken a fancy at Amyôt had been brought thence from the kennels, and was lying before the fire when she entered.

A much older and far wiser woman would have been persuaded to believe, as she believed, that in all this delicate *pre-*

venance for her pleasures and her preferences the tenderest love had spoken. She could not divine the self-reproach of her husband's conscience, which made him sensible that he perforce denied her so much that was her due, and made him proportionately eager to atone for that denial by every material enjoyment and outward mark of affection and of homage. All those who surrounded him, all his acquaintances, his household, and his dependents, imagined that he loved his young wife. The person who was in nowise deceived was Friederich Othmar.

'He is like a Sultan,' thought the old man angrily, 'a Sultan who loads the women of his zenana with ropes of pearls and emeralds as big as pigeon's eggs, that they may not perceive that he only visits them twice a year!'

By the law of the attraction of contrasts, there had arisen a mutual attachment between her and Baron Fritz: the unscrupulous old man, for whom as for Turcaret the whole world was composed of shareholders, felt more reverence and tenderness for Yseulte than he ever felt in his life for anyone; and she, who only saw his devotion to Othmar, his admirable manners, his shrewd wit, and his paternal kindness to herself, grew fond of, and grateful to, him, and was wholly ignorant of that mercilessness and selfishness which would have immolated all mankind to the service of his personal ambitions, and to which all morality or humanity appeared as absurd as they did to Fouquet or to Talleyrand.

Friederich Othmar incessantly strove to inspire her with his own passion for the House he adored, and though he failed because she was too thoroughly patrician in all her instincts to easily welcome such impressions, and was more apt to share her husband's disdain for all such ambitions, he did succeed in persuading her that the future content of Othmar himself would depend on the measure of the interest which he would take in those great fortunes of which he held the key.

'Understand this, my child,' he would say, 'a man in old age never forgives himself for the occasions which he has let slip in youth; and every man who in youth is *désœuvré*, pays for it heavily when age has come. Otho is a clever man, but he has the sickness of his century; he is indifferent to everything' ('even to you!' he thought impatiently). 'We call it the malady of the time; I do not know that we are right. It existed in Petronius Arbiter's, but it had no existence in our immediate forefathers'. However, you do not care for abstract discussions; you care for Otho. Well, let us confine ourselves to Otho. Nowadays, he is still a young man; he thinks he can afford to despise all things because he has strength, and health, and every form of enjoyment accessible to him—and he is certainly rich enough to play at cynicism all day if it amuse him most.'

'He is no cynic,' said Yseulte, quickly.

Baron Fritz smiled.

'A little of Alceste, surely? You read "Le Misanthrope," even at your convent, I imagine? My dear child, people always desire the fate they have not. Alfred de Vigny, with his sixteen quarterings, was always in rebellion against the fate of the poor gentleman; Otho, one of the richest men in Europe, is always rebelling against his riches as a chain and a species of dishonour. Now, it is for you to reconcile him to them; it is for you to persuade him that in the interests of his House lie those occupations and obligations which will not pall upon him as he grows older. I have known men weary of love and pleasure, but I have never known them weary of ambition. Otho scorns vulgar ambitions, but there are those which are not vulgar. In finance, as in life, there is no standing still. In his present mood he would be delighted if ruin were possible to us; it is not possible. Short of a European war that should last thirty years, nothing can harm us much. Still, no great house can long stand without a chief who cares for its welfare and honour. Like Catherine II., "je lis l'avenir dans le passé." A wise statesman has always the past of the world spread out before him like an ordnance map for his guidance. So may we also, in the past history of such houses as our own, see what has led to their ruin, and so guide ourselves to avoid those evils in our own case. Now, nothing has been so commonly the cause of *krach* in financial establishments as their being afflicted with imprudent or indifferent members. Otho is not very often imprudent, but he is entirely indifferent. Certainly,' continued the Baron, with pardonable pride, 'the Maison d'Othmar is too solidly established, too greatly important to the public life of Europe, to be easily imperilled by a young man's foibles. Still, I cannot disguise from myself the fact that when I am no more there will be no check on his eccentricities, no stimulus to his apathy. He will be ill served because he will at once expect too much virtue from men, and observe them with too little suspicion. The ship is sound and safe, and sure to have fair winds, but if the man at her helm be reading his Horace or his La Bruyère instead of steering by his chart, the ship may founder in clear weather and calm seas. You understand me?'

Metaphor was very unusual to him; he only condescended to use it for sake of making his meaning clearer to the feebleness of a feminine mind.

'Yes, I understand quite well,' she replied, with a little sigh. 'But I have no influence; he would think me impertinent; and I am sure no one will care for the honour of the House more truly than he.'

'Commercially speaking, there are two kinds of honour,' said Friederich Othmar. 'The fantastic and visionary one he will always maintain, but the practical one, which lies in doing your utmost for all the interests centred in yours, he will neglect. If I

were to tell him that we must collapse to-morrow, he would give up everything, down to his pet edition of Marcus Aurelius, to satisfy our debts; but if I were to tell him also how many financial schemes and companies would fall with us, he would only reply that the world would be exceedingly well rid of so many scoundrels. The honour is safe with him, doubtless, but the welfare is not. I shall not live for ever; I shall probably only live a very few years more. You must persuade your husband that his true duties and pleasures will lie in those ambitions which his fathers have bequeathed to him. I know that he and you would like to extinguish the House of Othmar financially, and dwell at Amyôt with no remembrance of the world. That is a lover's dream. My dear, simplicity and solitude are impossible in our society; a shepherd's peace is not attainable by a man whom the world claims. If I were to die to-morrow, and Otho to remain as indifferent to his own interests as he is now, all that I have done, all that his predecessors have done, would crumble away in ten or twenty years like so much soft sandstone in a succession of wet winters. He would not resent it now, but when he should be fifty years old he would resent it bitterly; he would never pardon himself. It is from this possibility that your influence must protect him.'

She hesitated, with a blush upon her face.

'I have no influence,' she said timidly. 'He knows so much better, so much more than I——'

'Obtain influence over him,' said the old man curtly; 'for if you do not, someone else will. Nay, my dear, pardon me; do not be hurt by my plain speaking. Such men as Otho are always influenced by women; he should be so now by you; he will be so if you will leave off worshipping him timidly, making him your law and your religion, and realise that you are an exquisitely lovely woman, with mind enough not to be the mere toy of any man. You are very young, it is true, but you have grown ten years in a few months. You must remember that to be in love is very agreeable, no doubt, but you are not his mistress; you are his wife. You must not think only of the immediate moment, but of the far future when he will not be in love with you, *ma belle*, nor you with him, but when you may still influence him nobly and wisely, and he may find in you his safest friend.'

Yseulte listened, with a little sigh.

It seemed to her as if all her happy illusions were taking wing, like the group of amorini which flew away from a weeping nymph on the ceiling of her room, which had been painted by Bougereau, They were seated in one of her own apartments, a very bower of primroses and white lilac, panelled in the Louis Seize style, with Bougereau's charming children in groups within each panel above the satin couches. Between the curtains, there were glimpses through the windows of the cedars and wellingtonias of the gardens. Without, it was a chilly winter's day, but within,

it was warm as summer, mellow with soft colour, fragrant with innumerable flowers; even to this great hotel of the Boulevard St.-Germain, which had always seemed to Othmar the most oppressive and detestable of all his many mansions, the advent of Yseulte had brought a grace and light and sweetness as of young and innocent life, a charm of home to these splendid and desolate suites of rooms. Her dogs lay on the hearth, her voice called the peacocks in the lonely gardens, her scores of Beethoven and Schubert and Berlioz lay open on the grand pianos. Even the look of the great bouquets in the Japanese bowls and the jars of Saxe and Sèvres was different: her hand had added a rose there, a fern here; they were flowers which were there because she loved them, not only because they served for decorations grouped by skilful servants as mere masses of colour. The great house, sombre in its Bourbon stateliness, magnificent in its architecture, but oppressive in its too continual display of wealth, was no longer 'une maison sans musique, une ruche sans abeilles;' it had gained a charm which was none the less perceptible because undefinable and impalpable, as the scent of tea-roses in the tall Sèvres jars. But Friederich Othmar was more sensible of this than was the possessor of the house and of her. Friederich Othmar, who had lived for fifty years and more without perceiving that he had never had, or wished to have, a home, perceived that his nephew had one and scarcely appreciated it. Friederich Othmar himself became suddenly alive to the pleasure of finding something homelike in that corner of her boudoir where she drew a Japanese screen between him and the draught from the windows, brought him his cup of green tea, and listened with an interest fresh and unfeigned to his anecdotes, his reminiscences, and his counsels: but he found Othmar there less often than he would have wished.

'He will be glad of that *coin du feu* some day,' he thought angrily; annoyed by a neglect which Yseulte herself did not perceive. She had been used to solitude; she was neither vain nor exacting; she understood that everything could not be in Paris altogether as it had been at Amyôt; and if she gave a sigh to that necessity, she bravely and tranquilly accepted it. The great world was about her with its demands, its solicitations, its tyrannies over time and thought; she had little leisure for meditation; the Countess Othmar could not escape the social obligations of her position or avoid its ceremonies and its courtesies.

She remained much graver and simpler than her contemporaries were; she cared for none of the noisy amusements of modern fashion; the world of pleasure seemed to her, on the whole, a little vulgar, a little tiresome, astonishingly monotonous, even in its feverish search for the untried and the startling. But at the same time she could not escape from its demands, and their effects upon her, and the counsels of Friederich Othmar incessantly

reminded her that she could best serve the honour of the name she bore by making Europe admire and praise her. It was a counsel which contained the seeds of danger; but he read her character aright.

'Voilà une qui ne *cascadera* jamais,' said the Baron to himself in his tongue of the Boulevards. He was infinitely proud of, and delighted with her; he gave her the most magnificent presents, bought her the rarest of jewels. He accompanied her constantly in her drives and to the opera, and even in the visits which she paid.

'It is Baron Fritz whom Othmar's marriage has reformed!' said a pretty woman, who had long considered the silver-haired financier as her own especial prey. He took a paternal pleasure in the admiration which the rare patrician graces of the girl awoke in that *tout Paris* which he had long considered the law-giver of the universe.

'If you had been Marie Antoinette, there might have been no revolution,' he said jestingly to her. 'You would never have flirted with Ferson, nor would you have played at shepherdessing, or worn a mask in the Palais Royal.'

'I think I should only have thought of France,' she answered.

'Which would not have prevented you from going to the guillotine, I dare say,' said the Baron. 'Nations are the concentrated distillation of the ingratitude of men. There is only one thing which one can always count on with absolute certainty, and that is, the general and individual thanklessness.'

Nothing was further from his thoughts than to cloud over the trust, confidence, and faith of her innocent optimism. He spoke as he thought and felt, and as a long experience of mankind had taught him to do, without reflecting that he dropped the bitterness of gall into a fair and limpid spring, which had seen nothing above its waters save the white lily-cups and the blue heavens.

'She will be robbed right and left endlessly if she be not taught a little mistrust,' he said to Othmar himself, who replied:

'Let her be robbed of everything rather than of her illusions. This is the only loss from which we never recover.'

'What an absurd idea!' thought the Baron, who had never cherished any illusions at all, and had found life exceedingly entertaining and enjoyable without them.

The practical mind can no more understand the regrets of the meditative one than a manufacturer, spending his days by choice amidst the roar of steam wheels and the ledgers of a counting-house, can understand the artist's anguish when he is shut up in a city garret whence he cannot see a sunset or a sunrise.

'The woes of the body, I grant, may be too much for one's philosophy,' the Baron was wont to say. 'With the gout, or neuralgia, or sciatica, Seneca's self might fail to retain serenity. But the sorrows of the emotions or of the imagination are so entirely

fictitious that anyone, by the exercise of a little self-control, may put them aside completely.'

'What! Even the losses of death?' objected some one once.

The Baron smiled:

'Death cannot affect you very greatly unless you have already committed an act of unwisdom—that is, have already attached yourself to some other life than your own.'

'Then where is love?' said his interlocutor.

'Where it has always been,' said Friederich Othmar, 'chiefly in the senses, partially in the imagination. When we have both the senses and the imagination under the control of our temperate judgment, it cannot disturb us seriously. In my youth, and even in my maturity,' he continued, with complacence, 'I have dallied with love as well as other men, but the moment that I felt that any one passion was likely to exercise undue influence upon me, I withdrew myself from it. To break a chain is difficult, but never to let it be forged is easy.'

He thought it his duty to put his young favourite on her guard against all the deceptions and delusions which the world prepares for its novices; he told her much more than her husband would have done of all the intricacies and meanings of the varied life which was about her, gave her the key to many of its secrets, and the hidden biographies of many of its personages.

'You are in the world, you must understand the world,' he said to her; 'if not, it will be a mere labyrinth to you, and you will be lost in it. You need not become a *mondaine* with your heart, but you must become one with your head, or the *mondaines* will devour you. It is not necessary that you should gamble or swear or get into debt for your petticoats, as they do; but it is necessary that you should understand the society of your time. At Amyôt you may be a young saint, as Heaven meant you to be, but in Paris you must be able to hold your own against those who are the reverse of saints. Otho ought to teach you all this himself, but he will not, so you must listen to me. I have not been so engrossed in the gold market all my days that I do not know *la haute gomme* down to the ground. In my leisure I have always gone into the world: the boudoir of a pretty woman is always much more amusing than a card-table or a pistol-gallery *L'École des Femmes* is the one to which every wise man goes.'

He paused, with a consciousness that he had better not pursue that theme.

'My child,' he resumed, as the carriage rolled down the Bois, 'you are not seventeen; you are in love with your husband; you sweep your conscience every morning with a palm-leaf to make sure there is no little film of a cobweb left in it; you think life is such a simple and beautiful thing that you have only to get up and go to bed as the sun does. You hear quantities of compliments, but you pay no attention to them; you are altogether as

innocent as a flower, and you are quite exquisite like that—it suits you; but, all the same, you cannot go on like that for ever. Men might let you, for we are not as black as we are painted, but women will not. It is from women that your sorrows will come, that your perception of evil will come, that your enemies will come. Satan, pardon me the word, would take off his hat to you and pass by on the other side, for he, too, is not as black as he has been painted. But women will not feel what Satan would feel; they are much more hard to touch. It is women whom you must try to understand; you can analyse without imbibing, as chemists do poisons.'

'Must one analyse at all?' said Yseulte, a little wistfully.

Such abrupt and familiar allusions to Satan disturbed the awe in which she had been reared at Faïel; but she was growing used to the perception that all the things which she held most sacred were mere Mother Goose's tales to the world in general, and to understand why her cousin Clothilde, who had her emblazoned chair at S. Philippe du Roule and occupied it so regularly, and was so heedful all Lent to wear the strictest mourning costume without a shred of lace, had yet not a grain of real religion in her. She began to comprehend what Blanchette had meant by all her rapturous felicitations, and sometimes the proud and austere young soul of her was humiliated to think that these mere material pleasures should have any attraction for her: she felt that her grandmother's ascetic and haughty teachings would have condemned such joys as mundane and vulgar. But the pleasure of them was there, nevertheless, and she was too honest in her self-analysis to dissimulate before her conscience. Unworldly as temperament and education alike made her, Yseulte was feminine enough and accessible enough to such vanities for all the possessions into which she entered to amuse and please her with their novelty and the sense of power which they gave. She was but a child in years, and the large households deferential to her slightest word, the grand equipages ready for her whim and fancy, the beautiful horses which bore her with the fleetness of the wind, the vast houses through which she could wander, conscious that she was the mistress of them all, the innumerable beauties of art which they contained, the caskets and coffers full of jewels and baubles, all these things beguiled her time and gratified that pride which a very young girl always feels in the sudden assumption of womanhood. She began to understand why all her companions at Faïel had thought her so fortunate. Her serious and spiritual nature made her feel a little ashamed at finding so much interest in such earthly treasures; in her self-examination she reproved herself, and almost contemned herself. But she was too young not to take such irresistible delight in all these things as a child takes in butterflies or poppies; it was delightful to say 'I wish,' and to see her wishes accomplished as by magic; it was charming to give

away right and left, as out of a bottomless purse; it was amusing to command, to confer, to be regarded as a source of all favours and all fortune, as the people of Amyôt and the household of Paris regarded her. In time, the delicacy of her taste, the seriousness of her intelligence, might probably make these possessions and privileges pall on her; in time she would see sycophancy where she now saw only devotion, and grow weary of a loyalty only rooted in self-interest; but, at the onset, life was to her like a fairy story, her empire was one on which the sun never set and in which the spring-time never waned.

Othmar never said one word which could have served to disenchant her. Conscious that he could not give her all the singleness of love which was her due, he strove to atone for any wrong he did her so by multiplying around her every physical gratification, and giving her an unlimited power of self-indulgence.

In this new life she was like a child who stands amidst the bewilderment of its crowd of New Year presents; sometimes she thought of herself as she had been six months before, sitting in the shadows of the stone cloisters at Faïel, in her dust-coloured convent frock, with the blue ribbon of merit crossing her breast and some holy book open on her hands, with a kind of wondering pity and strangeness, and a sense of being herself far, very far, away from any kinship with that sad grey figure.

That so little of egotism was aroused in her in this hot-house existence which she led, was due to the generosity and simplicity of her instincts, on which the contagion of worldly influences had little power. To send a silver crucifix to Faïel, or a piece of fine lace to Nicole, still gave her greater pleasure than to wear her own great diamonds or see the crowds in the Champs Elysées look after her carriage with its liveries of black velvet and white satin.

Meanwhile she had the natural feeling of every unselfish and generous nature, that her life was not full enough of thought for others. It was difficult for her at her age to know what to do, so as to carry out those theories of self-sacrifice which training and temperament alike made a religion to her.

Friederich Othmar, when he discovered this, told her, with some impatience, that the House of Othmar always did what was expected of it in this respect, and that its women had no occasion to trouble their heads with such matters.

'Wherever we have been located we have always been good citizens,' he said, with truth. 'We have always borne our due share of public expenditure or public almsgiving; perhaps more than our due share. Myself, I believe that all that sort of charity is a vast mistake. It is intended as a sop to the wolves, but you cannot feed wolves on sops. They will always want your blood, however they may lick up your mess.'

Yseulte remembered that S. Francis had proved that even wolves may be tamed into affection and usefulness; but though

she believed firmly in that legend, she hesitated to put it forward, even as an allegory, as evidence against the arguments of the Baron. She did not lack courage, nor even that truest courage, the courage of opinion, but she had been reared in the old traditions of high breeding, which make contradiction a vulgarity, and, from the young to the old, an offence.

'I hope you will not make yourself into a sort of Judith Montefiore,' continued the Baron irritably. 'We are not Jews. Jews must do that kind of thing to get themselves tolerated. We could forgive them the Crucifixion, but we cannot forgive them their percentage. Though we are not Jews, Otho has already done some Quixotic things in the Montefiore fashion. I hope you will not encourage him to continue them.'

'Tell me what they were,' she said, with the light in her eyes and the colour in her face.

'Not I,' said the Baron; 'I much prefer to see him smoking à Londrès at the Jockey.'

'Had he ever any very great sorrow?' she ventured to ask.

'None, my dear, but what he chose to make for himself,' replied Friederich Othmar, with contempt. 'Do you remember Joubert's regret that he could not write his thoughts on the bark of trees by merely looking at them?—well, Otho's griefs are much as baseless. As if,' he added, 'as if there were any real grief in the world—except the gout!'

'He is like Obermann, like Amiel,' she said timidly. She had read passages in the volumes of those dreamy and isolated thinkers in the library of Amyôt. Friederich Othmar shrugged his shoulders; those names signified to him the very lowest deeps of human ineptitude and folly.

'Men who were so afraid of disappointment and disillusion that they would allow themselves to enjoy nothing! It would be as reasonable to let oneself die of starvation as a preventive of dyspepsia! Such men do not think; they only moon. The cattle that lie and graze under the trees have meditations quite as useful. My child,' he added, 'would you be wise or foolish if you threw all your diamonds into the river in anger because they were not stars? That is what your husband does with his life. You must learn to persuade him that the stars are unattainable, and that the diamonds represent a very fair and fruitful kingdom if not the powers of the air.'

Yseulte sighed wistfully. She vaguely felt that it was not within her means to reconcile him with the world and fate; she had not the magic wand.

'I am always in dread,' continued the Baron, 'that you, with your religious ideas, and he, with his impatience of his position, will do something extraordinary and Quixotic; will turn S. Pharamond into a *maison de santé*, or this hotel into a lazar-house for cancer. I shall never be surprised at any madness of that sort.'

Yseulte sighed a little.

'But, there is the misery of the world all around us,' she ventured to say; 'if we could alleviate it, would it not be worth any sacrifice?'

'My dear,' said Baron Fritz, 'when Napoléon gave the opium at Jaffa, he did more to alleviate suffering than all the philanthropists have ever done. Yet it has been always brought against him as his worst action. I went once, out of curiosity, to see the Incurables at the hospital of la Salpêtrière. Well, if false sentiment did not prevent the treatment à la Jaffa taking place there, an infinitude of hideous suffering and of hideous deformity would be mercifully ended. But the world is so sentimental that it will send several hundred thousand of young and healthy men to endure all kinds of tortures in war for a question of frontier, or a matter of national etiquette, but it esteems it unlawful to kill idiots or drug to death incurables cursed with elephantiasis or leprosy.'

Yseulte's clear eyes grew troubled; these views of life were perplexing to her. At Faïel all such contradictions had been simply accepted as ordained under one unquestioned and divine law; the conversation of Friederich Othmar depressed and bewildered her, but she could perceive its reason. It made her reflect; it made her more of a woman, less of a child. He thought that was for the best. If she were not educated in some worldly knowledge, the world would make an easy prey of her.

'Otho treats her as if she were an ivory madonnina who would remain aloof on an altar all her days,' he said to a woman he knew. 'On the contrary, she is a beautiful creature, about whom all the world will buzz and sting like bees about a lily. She must be taught not to throw away her honey. She is just now in the clouds; she is very much in love with a man who is not in love with her; she is full of ideals and impossible sentiments. She is half a child, half an angel; but to hold her own in the world she must be something else—not so angelic and not so childish—and she must learn to esteem people at their value, which is for the most part very small. It would be even well if she could see Otho as he is; she would take life more easily. She would not be so likely to fall headlong from a heaven of adoration into a stone well of disillusion. Truths live at the bottom of these wells, no doubt, but they are not agreeable, and they give a shock to sensitive people. A woman is prettier when she is sensitive. It is like piety or charity—it is an essentially feminine ornament, but it is not a quality which wears well.'

His friend laughed.

'Do you think Othmar will thank you for so educating his wife?'

'He has never thanked me for anything that I have done,' he replied. 'But that does not prevent me from doing what I consider is my duty, or is most wise.'

'Say wisdom,' returned the lady. 'That suits you better than duty. Duty is ridiculous if you do not let *le bon Dieu* pose behind it.'

'I know people say so,' answered the Baron; 'but it is only an idea. In practical life agnostics and disbelievers of every sort make just as good citizens as the pietists.'

With the second week of December there was a great social event in Paris. The Hôtel Othmar was opened to the world. 'The gates of Janus unclose,' said one who deemed himself a wit in allusion to a war, then in embryo, into whose conception and gestation the gold of the Othmar was considered to enter largely.

The Boulevard St.-Germain and all its approaches were like rivers of light, and the sound of carriage wheels was like the roll of artillery. 'Tout Paris' flocked there, and even the Faubourg disdained not to pass through those immense gates of gilded bronze, which were nicknamed of Janus, since the mistress of the salons within was by birth incontestibly a Comtesse de Valogne.

'Tiens, tiens, tiens!' murmured Aurore de Vannes. 'Is it possible for twelve months to have so changed a *fillette* into a goddess! Really, we were all wrong, and Othmar was right. We all thought her a *pauvrette*, to be put away in a holy house; he had the sense to see that she would become superb, and would set him right with all the Faubourg. The Faubourg was always well inclined to him, because his grandmother was a de Soissons-Valette, but his marriage has made him one of them; he is definitely placed for ever. Really, I never gave him credit for so much foresight when he sent that ivory casket. I thought it was only a caprice.'

'Othmar cares not a straw for the Faubourg,' said her husband, out of the pure spirit of contradiction, 'He will never give his millions to carry on a Holy War or restore the throne. He is more likely to dream of a great Western empire with its capital at the Golden Horn. He is a Slavophile.'

'He is wholly indifferent to politics; it is Baron Fritz who is the political conspirator,' returned the Duchesse. 'Otho is a mere dreamer, and he used to be a discontented one. Perhaps he is not so now.'

'He does not look especially happy; she does. I confess I should be sorry for him to become contented; the contemplation of his discontent has always reconciled me with having nothing myself,' said a great diplomatist, whose debts were as considerable as his talents.

'If he be not contented——' began the Duc, and paused, conscious that for him to say anything except a jest of any marriage under the sun would appear supremely ridiculous to his companions. Yet his admiration for Yseulte was not dormant, and took a still warmer character as he saw her in the *grande tenue* of a woman of the world, with the Othmar diamonds, long famous and long unseen, on her fair hair and her white breast.

her cousins in that magnificent house; she had had an innocent triumph in showing how well she could fill the part of a woman of the world; she felt like a child who has played a queen's part in some pageant, and played it well; something of the insidious charm of the world had begun to steal on her; something of its vanity and of its rivalry had begun to attract her;—very little, for her nature was too proud, too pure, and too serious to yield easily to these temptations, but something nevertheless. Only as yet her one dominant thought was of him in it all. Had he also been content; had there been nothing that he could have desired otherwise?

She turned with a smile, half timid still, as he knocked at the door and entered her chamber. Her attendants withdrew at a sign from him; he took her in his arms and kissed her.

'I thank you for all your triumphs, dear,' he said kindly. 'They are mine.'

'Did I really do well?' she said doubtfully, but joyfully.

'Perfectly, perhaps almost too well; Paris will talk too much of you.'

'I forgot nothing?' she asked, still anxiously.

'You forgot nothing, and you looked—much too beautiful for men quickly to forgive me! No, dear, I do not flatter you; flattery would be absurd from me to you; I tell you the simple truth.'

'I am glad,' she said simply, 'for I have nothing else to reward you with for all you have given to me.'

She spoke shyly, for she was always in awe of him a little. Her arm, uncovered to the shoulder as the loose folds of the sleeve fell away from it, stole timidly about his throat; in all her caresses there was the hesitation of a proud and delicate nature blent with the longing of an ardent love. Habit had not familiarised her with the relation in which he stood to her; the brutalising intimacy of marriage had not dwarfed or dulled her ideal and adoration of him. He was still much less her lover than her lord.

Othmar took the bright gold of her heavy hair in his hand, and drew it through his fingers.

'On chasse de race,' he said, with a smile. 'You receive a great crowd as if you had been reared in a court from your babyhood.'

'You told me what to do,' she answered simply. 'It seems very easy; besides, every one was so extremely kind.'

'The kindness of society,' thought Othmar, 'the kiss of Judas!'

But he did not say so. Let her learn for herself what it was worth, he thought; the knowledge would come soon enough of itself.

Yseulte's face grew grave as she sat lost in thought.

'I do not think it is right to care for this sort of thing,' she said, with hesitation. 'It is only a sort of vanity. And then all these diamonds and these great pearls—they say they are worth millions—I do not like to wear them whilst there are so many without clothes or food of any kind; one knows that there is so much misery all about us here in Paris. Is it right, do you think, to enjoy oneself in this kind of way? I seem to remember nothing but myself all the day long——'

Othmar smiled and sighed.

'Enjoy, my child, while you can; leave all those grave thoughts for your older years. If you like to sell your jewels, and give them all to the poor, you can do it, but wait a few years first; wait to see more of the world. There is a cruel science, called political economy, which they certainly did not teach you at Faïel; you must learn something of that before you try to decide these questions, which have vainly perplexed every thoughtful man since rich and poor were together on earth. And now, shut your pretty eyes, and sleep and dream of your triumphs; they have been very innocent ones, you need not repent them.'

He kissed her again, and left her to her daybreak slumber in the warm orange-flower-scented air of her bed-chamber; and himself went out into the chill half-frozen streets of Paris on one of those errands of mercy of which he never spoke to any human being, and which were the result of his pity for men rather than of any belief or faith or sympathy that he had with them. He was one of the few men whom the lawless classes of Paris have ever respected.

Othmar himself could go unharmed where the police would not have ventured to go save in force; and in the days of the Commune the worst leaders of it had put a white cross on the great houses of which he was master, and spared them from torch and shell for sake of the young man who was wont to pass through the vilest quarters of Paris, with his hand ever open and his compassion never denied. They knew that if their *couches sociales* could have been an accomplished fact, Othmar himself would never have wished the old state of things maintained, but would have accepted the new with indifference and perfect courage, himself glad to be rid of a burden.

They forgave him his riches for sake of his own contempt for them; his courage, even his coldness, attracted them. He had no *blague*; he was entirely sincere; he never attempted to convert them to anything; he aided them without putting any price on his aid, either of gratitude or doctrine. They knew that he had neither fear of them nor love for them, but that he had a profound sense of a common humanity with them, which was in his eyes as in theirs another name for a common misfortune.

The times were out of joint for him. If he had been created

with the capacity of religious faith, he would have been willingly what François Xavier or Père Lacordaire were. But he had the clear and critical intelligence of a man of the world; the fables of faith could not give him any mental pabulum. He took refuge in pity; it seemed to him that men were bound to do for one another at least as much as buffaloes do, which in trouble gather around the wounded ones of the herd.

Melville alone had found out something of what he did; Melville, who although the sweetest-voiced, softest-handed, of churchmen and courtiers in salon and boudoir, never feared or failed to descend into the haunts of iniquity, to grapple with disease and crime. In such places he and Othmar had met by chance more than once, and on one occasion Melville had said to him: 'You have more influence than I, because they do not suspect you; a priest is always suspected of trying to save souls only to serve his own.'

'If I have more influence than you, they are thankless,' rejoined Othmar; 'for you certainly love them, and I care nothing for them, absolutely nothing.'

'Why do you serve them, then?' asked Melville, in surprise.

Othmar sighed impatiently. 'It seems to me that one is bound in honour when fate has placed oneself beyond temptation;—besides, these reeking breeding-pens of crime in the midst of our own luxury are horrible; they are cancers in the very womb of human nature. Your Christianity has endeavoured to cure them for eighteen centuries, and has always failed miserably. The cancer grows and grows.'

Few persons save those of the police, who were perforce acquainted with his movements, were aware of the intimacy and influence he had acquired with the most wretched and the most dangerous classes of Paris; the food of *maisons centrales* and the emigrants of Nouméa. Often Friederich Othmar wondered within himself whither went the large sums which his nephew drew and spent without explanation; what he spent on art and on pleasure was known, but there were often great quantities of money taken by Othmar, in the exercise of his unquestionable right, for the use of which all the Baron's ingenuity failed to find an account. Numberless families redeemed from misery, many youths saved from crime and the galleys, many grown men aided to begin new lives in other climes, and many a foul place purged to moral and physical cleanliness, swallowed up these millions of francs, of which the employment remained a secret to the argus eyes of Baron Fritz. There was a nobility about the indifference of this very rich man to his riches which conquered the hatred of the poor even amongst the Socialistic arrondissements, where such hatred was the sole religion recognised. They knew that Othmar himself was as disdainful of existent society as they were themselves, and that although fortune had so favoured him, he was no more con-

tent with the arrangement of the world than they were themselves. They were continually, brutally, ungrateful, but underneath their gratitude they liked him, and would never have harmed him.

As he walked out now into the misty air of dawn, he recalled the lovely face, with its sleepy eyelids, of his young wife with a sharp pang of conscience. Why could he not be content with that innocent and undivided love?

He recalled with a sense of some great fault in himself how entirely she was outside his life, how little hold she had upon his passions or his emotions. She was exquisite, she was purity itself in body and soul; he realised his own absolute possession of her as he had never done that of any other woman. He had been, that night, proud of her grace before the world, charmed by her manner, conscious of her incomparable distinction; and she was his as entirely as any flower that he might gather in a field. For him had been her first flush, her first kiss, her first consciousness of love; and yet, as he walked through the streets of Paris, leaving her to sink to sleep like a happy and tired child, he was conscious that his heart was indifferent to her; that, the mere early inclinations of the senses pacified, she had no power to rouse in him more than the kindly and indulgent affection which a child might have called forth by its helplessness and beauty.

He desired earnestly to make her as happy as any creature could be on earth, and would have denied her nothing which could have helped to make her so; but he could not command his own passions, and he could not make her the supreme mistress of them. She was a most lovely and most innocent creature, who was welcome to enjoy all the greatness and the grace of life with which he could dower her; she was a young saint who would bear his children in her breast as innocently as the peach-blossom bears the fruit; she was at all times both dear to him and sacred to him; but love for her was not there. He sighed impatiently as he felt that in all his words and his caresses he acted a part with her, that perhaps sooner or later, when the world had taught her better what men were, she would know that, and would be no longer so easily deceived.

As he had watched her that evening in her serenity, her gracefulness, her dignity, he had all at once remembered that in the great world youth grows rapidly, as a flower in a hothouse, that she would be surrounded by many who would ask no happier task than to enlighten her ignorance and embitter her confidence, and that if she ever came to learn and realise that she had owed her marriage partially to his compassion, and more still to his passion for another woman, her heart might break under the burden of that bitter knowledge, but her pride would never pardon the offence.

He began to feel as if he had wronged her, though neither by

act nor word had he been untrue to her since her marriage. She was so charming in every way, so delicate of thought, so graceful in expression, so intelligent even in her ignorance, so wholly worthy to inspire and retain the greatest love of a man's life, that he felt guilty before her, knowing that his pulses beat no quicker when he joined her after absence, that when her young lips, fresh as roses, touched his own, he met them without ardour or emotion. He had wished society to attract her; it seemed to him the quickest and the easiest compensation that he could offer her. At the root of the willingness with which he entertained the world, he to whom it was as indifferent as it was commonplace, was the unacknowledged sentiment that if Yseulte placed her happiness, as her temperament would lead her to do, in the inner life, in the affections and in the sympathies, she would be inevitably most miserable soon or late, since soon or late she would discover the poverty of his own heart; and his heart was richly endowed enough by nature to make him ashamed to think that it might ever be so. Friederich Othmar judged him harshly but justly; his indulgence and tenderness to her were not those of a lover, but were the accumulated gifts with which he strove to make her blind to his own coldness. The more he lived with her, the more he felt as though it were an unpardonable sin to have no love to give her, and the farther the possibility of such love receded from him. Esteem, admiration, tenderness, even affection, may all exist only to make the absence of love itself the more conspicuous.

As he went through the quiet streets, almost wholly deserted in the early hour of the morning, and swept by a keen wind, a waggon thundering along at too rapid a pace for so clumsy a vehicle caught the wheel of a carriage, which was coming in the opposite direction. The shock flung the carriage on the kerbstone; one of its two horses fell, the other struggled like a demoniac; the coachman and servant were thrown to the ground. Othmar naturally hastened to the spot. He was the only person in sight. The carriage itself had oscillated violently, but was not upset; its occupant had opened the door of it before he could arrive at the spot, and had leaped lightly out, though wrapped in sable furs from head to foot. When he reached the place, the fur-clad figure was standing in calm contemplation of the harm which had been done, and of the struggling horses which the coachman, who had sprung to his feet, was endeavouring to pacify.

'Othmar, is it you?' said a voice whose clear and sweet vibration sent the blood to his temples; and the eyes of Nadine Napraxine looked at him from under the sable lining of her velvet hood.

The waggon had blundered on out of sight, its driver in terror of the distant figure of a sergeant-de-ville who had now approached

the scene. The fallen men had both found their feet, and the horses were still throwing themselves from side to side with broken traces and slippery pavement adding to the difficulty increased by their terror.

Othmar's own *coupé*, which had followed him at a distance, had now come up, and his servants assisted hers. He opened the door of his own carriage.

'Pray accept it,' he said hurriedly. 'They will drive you where you wish; I will stay and help your people.'

'My people are idiots,' she said, as she gave them a disdainful glance. 'The waggon was large enough to be seen. I was coming from the Gare du Nord; my women and the *fourgons* are behind me. What are you about at this hour? Does the Countess Othmar allow you to be out so early—or so late?'

There was a grain of malice in the accent of the words; Othmar coloured despite himself, yet knew not why. He felt his whole being thrill at the mere sound of the sweet, cruel, well-remembered tones, and hated her.

She looked at him as they stood together on the kerbstone of the deserted and foggy street. She was enveloped in her long fur mantle, and none of the lines of her figure were traceable: she had no more contour than an Esquimaux. Yet, nevertheless, that incomparable grace which belonged to her—as its movement to a bird, as its fragrance to a flower—seemed to detach itself, and escape, even from the heavy shapeless covering of the travelling-cloak in which she had been wrapped throughout her long express journey from Russia hither by way of Berlin and Strasburg. There was nothing visible of her except her starry eyes, and yet all the irresistible power which she possessed made his pulses fast and his thought confused; he strove against his own weakness, and pressed his offer on her with a cold courtesy.

'Well, I will take it since you wish it,' she said, as she entered his *coupé*. 'You will say who I am to this sergeant-de-ville, and whatever else may be necessary, though it is no case for the police since the waggoner has made good his escape; and if he had not, I certainly should let him alone. Tell your men my address—you remember it? *Au revoir!* I shall come and witness your happiness. Many things from me to your wife.'

They were only the usual words of commonplace politeness, yet to the ear of Othmar they were fraught with a thousand meanings. 'C'est le ton qui fait la chanson,' and the tone of these perfectly simple sentences had for him irony, mockery, menace, and ridicule. Remember her address! Remember the Hôtel Napraxine! As if to his dying day he would ever forget the slightest trifle which had ever been associated with her!

His horses started off at a swift trot, and he lost her from sight. The questions of the police as to the cause of the accident started him as though someone had spoken to him in his sleep.

When the matter was over, and the disabled carriage had been dragged away by hand, and the frightened horses led homewards by their coachman, it was too late to go where he had intended. He returned to his own house, bathed, dressed, and went to his library; but he could not give his attention to what he read. Nor when, with the early hours of the forenoon, various persons came to see him by appointment, could he confine his thoughts to the subjects under consideration.

At noon he gave his card to a servant, and told the man to go and inquire at her hotel if the Princess Napraxine had suffered any inconvenience from the accident of that morning.

The servant brought him back one of the small pale-rose-tinted notes, folded in three, with the crown embossed in silver, which he knew so well. The few lines in it said only:

'Merci bien! Vous êtes toujours preux chevalier. Je n'ai rien souffert du tout. Le Prince vous remerciera.—N. N.'

It was the merest trifle, a thing of no import, such as she wrote by scores every week to numbers of indifferent people; yet it had a sort of fascination for him. He could not destroy it; its faint subtle scent, like that of a tea rose, recalled so vividly the charm of the woman who had written it; it seemed to him as if no one but Nadine Napraxine could have sent that little note, coloured like a sea-shell, delicate as a butterfly, with its miniature and *mignonne* writing. Ashamed of his own weakness, and angry with himself for his own concessions, he threw it into a drawer of his bureau and turned the key on it.

He had not seen her for a year, and her spell was unbroken; all he had done to escape from it was of no avail. One glance of her eyes from beneath the furs in that bleak, grey, misty daybreak, had sufficed to re-establish her dominion. He was conscious that life seemed no more the same to him since that chance encounter; it would be more troubled, more excited, more disturbed, but it would not be again the dull and even course which it had seemed to be when he had entered absent from her.

'I will never see her, except in a crowd,' he said to himself, whilst he remembered, with self-reproach, the tender caresses of Yseulte, which left him so calm, and even in his heart so cold!

Of course he had known that the Princess Napraxine, who was more Parisienne than the Parisiennes, would, sooner or later, return to her home there; would sooner or later reappear in the society which she had always preferred to all other. Russia had never held her long, and the seclusion which both her taste and her irritation had made her seek after the suicide of Seliedoff could not, in the nature of things, have lasted longer than one season. Yet the sense that she was there within a few streets of him, separated only by a few roods of house-roof from him, affected him with a force altogether unforeseen. He realised in it that there is no cure in simples for strong fevers, and that the will

of man is as naught against the dominion of passion. Even that slight letter, with its odour as of pale rose-buds, had a power over him which all the loveliness and innocence of Yseulte could not exercise. The irresistible force of his own emotions humiliated him in his own eyes.

He shrank a little, with almost a sense of guiltiness, as a little tap came on the panels of the library door, and from behind the tapestry the fair head of his young wife peeped cautiously.

'May I come in?' she asked, as a child might have done.

He rose with instinctive courtesy and opened the door to her.

It was noonday, and her few hours of sleep had sufficed to banish all her fatigue, and to make her as fresh, as radiant, and as clear-eyed as she had been in the summer woods of Amyôt. She had none of the languor which late hours cause in later years; she had slept as soundly as a young fawn tired with its play, and had awakened as refreshed as a flower that uncloses at sunrise. She wore a long loose gown of palest blue, opening a little at the throat, with much old lace, of which the yellow tinge made whiter still the whiteness of her skin. The gown was of satin, and had gleams and shadows in it as she moved. Her eyes smiled; her cheeks were flushed from her bath; her entrance had a childish eagerness.

'Do tell me again that I did well last night,' she said, with a child's longing for the recapitulation of its innocent triumphs.

He did not look at her as he drew her to him with a mechanical caress.

'You did perfectly,' he answered, absently. 'A great ball is a woman's Austerlitz, I suppose. Do not let it make you in love with the world.'

'One cannot but like it,' she said, with her habitual truthfulness, a little wistfully. 'That is what I thought last night; perhaps it is wrong—when so many suffer——'

'They would not suffer a whit less if you did not give a ball.'

She hesitated, being still shy with him, and afraid of that which she had never seen, but which she always dreaded, his displeasure.

'But,' she said timidly, 'when one *is* so very happy, one wants to do something to deserve it. You have made for me such a perfect life, I want to give others something out of it. I should like to be useful, to show that I am grateful; not only to give away money——'

She paused, colouring a little at her own temerity. She did not express herself very well, because she was so much in earnest, and so uncertain as to whether it would seem discontented or vain in her to say so much. In an earlier moment the words would have touched his heart; he would have probably replied by admitting her into some association with the efforts of his own life, and some knowledge of his own desires and regrets for

humanity at large. But in that instant he was only anxious to be alone. He answered a little absently:

'My child, ask your confessor these questions; he will show you many ways; you think him a good man—I have too many doubts myself to be able to solve yours.'

He spoke with a certain impatience; the harsher note grated on her sensitive ear. She felt that her scruples, which were very honest and sincere, did not meet with the same sympathy from him that they had received a few hours earlier.

A shadow passed over her face and she was silent.

'My dear,' continued Othmar, a little penitently, a little inconsistently, 'I have had such doubts as yours all my life, but no one has ever respected me for them; not even those in whose interest they tormented me. We cannot be wiser than all the world. If we stripped ourselves bare to found some community or some universal asylum, we should only be ridiculed as visionaries or as mischievous disturbers of the public peace and of the balance of fortune. Charity has oftener created a proletariat than it has increased prosperity. These questions have haunted me all my life. When I have found an answer to them, I will tell you. Until then, enjoy yourself. You are at the age when enjoyment is most possible and most natural. I wish your days to be happy.'

He spoke with a certain distraction; he was thinking little of what he said, much of the eyes which had looked at him from under the gloom of the fur in the mists of the dawn. He sighed unconsciously as he felt that this innocent young life beside him was no more to him—hardly more—than the flower which she wore at her throat. He recognised all its beauty, spiritual and physical, but only as he might have done that of a picture he looked at, of a poem he read.

'Enjoy yourself, dear; why not?' he added with kindness. 'You were made to smile as a primrose is made to blossom, and it is now mid-April with you.'

He kissed her, and passed his hand carelessly over her hair, then he glanced at the clock on his writing-table.

'I must leave you, for I have an appointment to keep. What are you going to do with your day?'

'Blanchette is to come to me. I have not seen her yet. The children are only now up from Bois le Roy, and Toinon is ill.'

She answered him with a little sigh. She wanted him to understand, and could not better explain, how her own intense thankfulness for the new joys of her life filled her sensitive conscience with a trembling longing to become more worthy of it all, and to let the light which was about her stream into all dark places, and illumine them with love and peace. But she felt chilled, and discouraged, and silenced; and she had been so accustomed to keep all rebellious thoughts mute, that she did not dream of pursuing a theme to which he appeared indifferent. He

kissed her hand and left her. She sank down for a moment on the writing-chair he had occupied before the table, and leaned her forehead on her hands with the first vague sensation of loneliness which had ever touched her since her marriage day.

'If my little child had been born alive,' she thought, 'then I should always have known what duty to do, what use to be——'

It was an infinite trouble to her conscience that in these great palaces of the Othmars she was as useless in her own sight as any one of the green palm trees or the rose-hued parrots in the conservatories. She could give money away, indeed—almost endlessly; but that did not seem enough to do; that counted to her as nothing, for it cost no effort. It hurt her to feel, as she did feel vaguely, that she was no more the companion of her husband than the marble statue of Athene which stood at one end of his great library. He was infinitely indulgent to her. He was perfectly courteous and kind, and generous even to excess; but he never opened his heart to her, he never made her those familiar confidences which are the sweetest homage that a man can render to a woman, even when they display his own weakness or unwisdom. She had too little experience to be able to measure all that this meant, all of which it argued the absence; but as much perception as she had of it mortified her. At Amyôt she had vaguely suffered from it, but here, in Paris, he seemed very far away from her in thought and feeling. She felt that she was but one of the ornaments of his house, as the azaleas and palms were in their great porcelain vases.

To be exquisitely dressed, to be the possessor of some of the finest jewels in the world, to be told to amuse herself as she chose, to have the world at her feet, and all Paris look after her as she drove over its asphalte, would have been enough to most women of her age to make up perfect happiness; but it was not enough for the girl whose thoughtful years had been passed under the sad and solemn skies of Morbihan, and who had the sense of duty and the instincts of honour inherited from great races who had perished on the scaffold and on the battle-field. There was a pensive seriousness in her nature which would not permit her to abandon herself wholly to the self-indulgences and gaieties of the life of the world. She was too grave and too spiritual to become one of the butterflies who flirt with folly from noonday till night. Her chastened childhood in the darkened rooms on the Ile St. Louis had left a gravity with her which could not easily assimilate itself to the levity and the license of modern society, which offended her taste as it affronted her delicacy.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A FEW minutes after Othmar had left the house her groom of the chambers ushered into the library the Duc de Vannes and his elder daughter. Blanchette, muffled up to her dancing turquoise-coloured eyes in sealskin, and with her small, impatient feet cased in little velvet boots lined with fur, in which costume Carlos Durand was about to paint her portrait for the salon, with a background of snow and frosted boughs taken from the Bois, sprang across the long room with the speed of a little greyhound, and embraced her cousin as if she had never loved anyone so much in all the days of her life. They had not met for six months, for Blanchette had been in penitence with her governesses and the dowager Duchesse de Vannes, in the depths of the Jura; a chastisement which had only sent her back to Paris two centimètres taller, full of resolution to avenge herself, and more open-eyed and quick-eared than ever.

'Ah, my dearest! How happy I am to see you again!' she cried in ecstasy, lifting her pretty little pale face to be kissed, in a transport of affection.

'Il faut la ménager: elle est si riche!' she had said to Toinon that morning, who was in bed with a cold, and who had grumbled in answer, 'Autrefois elle était si bête!' to which Blanchette had judiciously replied, 'On n'est jamais bête quand on est riche.'

De Vannes, when his little daughter's ecstasies were somewhat spent, approached with a smile and kissed the hand of Yseulte with a reverential but cousinly familiarity.

'Out so early!' she said in surprise. 'Surely you never used to see the outer air till two o'clock?'

'I brought this *feu-follet* to enjoy your kindness,' said the Duc, 'that I might have the pleasure of seeing you before all the world does. I wished, too, to be the first to congratulate you, my cousin, on your brilliant success last night. You were perfect, marvellous, incredible!——'

'I think I was much like anyone else,' said Yseulte, to check the torrent of his adjectives; 'and the success of the ball was due more to Julien than to us; he was so enchanted to have a ball to organise in this great house after so many years without any receptions.'

'Julien is an admirable maître d'hôtel, no doubt,' answered de Vannes, with a smile; 'and he is happy in possessing a young mistress who appreciates his zeal and fidelity, but it is not of Julien that all Paris is talking and sighing this morning.'

'They must be talking and sighing in their beds then,' said Yseulte, a little impatiently. 'I thought no one was up so early

as this except myself. Is the Duchesse well? She was so kind last night; she gave so much *entrain*——'

'You know I never see her till dinner, if then, unless I chance to cross her in the Bois,' answered the Duc, a little irritably.

He had risen three hours too early, and had bored himself to bring his little daughter here in his *coupé*; and he felt that so much self-sacrifice was not likely to avail him anything except that as he looked at Yseulte he could see for once in his life a woman who was still prettier in the morning than at night. He himself did not bear that trying light well; the lines about his eyes were deep and not to be hidden by any art, his eyes were dull and heavy, his cheeks hollow, and his moustache dyed. By night he was still one of the most elegant of *la haute gomme*, and his natural distinction could never altogether leave him; but his manner of life had aged him prematurely, and he felt old beside the freshness and the youth of Yseulte.

His vanity and his good sense alike counselled him to retire from a position which would avail him nothing; but a certain malice, which was a part of his character, and which his little daughter had inherited in increased degree, prompted him first to take reprisal for the indifference of his reception. Yseulte remained standing, holding the hand of Blanchette, evidently not desiring that he should be long there, and giving him no invitation to protract his visit until her breakfast hour. Blanchette's mischievous eyes watched her father's visible annoyance with keen appreciation of it; she had not forgotten the medallion given at Millo, and she had guessed very well why she had received the extraordinary honour of a seat in his brougham as he drove to the Jockey. She had been just about to leave the house with her maid when the Duc, passing her in the vestibule, had said carelessly: 'Is it you, you little cat? Ah, you are going to your cousin. Well, jump in with me, and I will set you down as I pass; I am going to the Jockey.' Now Blanchette knew as well as he did that the way from their house to the Jockey Club did not by any means lie past the Hôtel d'Othmar; but she had been too shrewd to say that, and too proud of driving beside her father, who smoked a big cheroot, and told her about the little theatres.

'Can I see Othmar?' he asked now, as he made his adieux to Yseulte.

'I am sorry, but he is just gone out,' she answered; 'I think he is gone for some hours; I do not know where.'

'You will soon learn not to say so,' thought the Duc, diverted even in his discomfiture by her simplicity. He said aloud:

'Do you think he may have gone to see the Napraxines? He was always a great friend of theirs, and they arrived last night; it is in all the papers, but then you do not read the papers. I only ask, because I should be so glad if I could meet him anywhere. The Prefect of Nice writes to me about the basin of

Millo; now S. Pharamond has much more sea-front and much larger share of the harbour than we have, and if Othmar would use his influence, one word from him——'

'I will tell him; he will be sure to come to you or write to you,' she said quickly. She had flinched a little at the name of the Napraxine, which no one had spoken to her since that silver statue of the Love with the empty gourd had been sent to her before her marriage.

'Bien joué, petit papa,' thought Blanchette, with understanding and appreciation, as her father bowed himself out of Othmar's library.

'Oh, how happy you are!—how I wish I were you!' she cried, five minutes later, as she skipped about her cousin's boudoir, while the glow of the fire of olive-wood shone on the panels which Bougereau had painted there with groups of those charming nude children which he can set frolicking with almost the soft poetic grace of Correggio.

Yseulte smiled on the little impudent face of the child, who leaned her elbows on her knees as she spoke.

'I am very happy,' she said, with perfect truth. 'But I hope you will be as much so one day, Blanchette.'

Blanchette nodded.

'I shall marry into the Finance too; the Noblesse is finished; papa says so. He said yesterday, "Nous sommes de vieux bonzes —emballons-nous!"'

Blanchette tied her arms and legs in a knot as she had seen a clown do, and made a pantomimic show of being rolled away on a wheel-barrow; then she gathered herself up and came and stood before her cousin and hostess.

'Te voilà, grande dame!' she cried, looking at her with her own little pert flaxen head, with its innumerable little curls held on one side critically, as she surveyed Yseulte from head to foot with a frank astonishment and admiration. It was only such a little while ago that Yseulte had been her butt and victim at Millo; that she had ridiculed her for her grey convent dress, her thick shoes, her primitive, pious habits, brought from the Breton woods, and lo!—here she stood, 'très grande dame!' as Blanchette, a severe judge in such matters, acknowledged to herself. So tall, so elegant, so stately, with her beautiful slender hands covered with great rings, and her morning-gown a cascade of marvellous old lace. 'She looks quite twenty years old!' thought Blanchette. 'How nice it must be to be married, if one gets grown up all at once like that!'

She was so absorbed in her thoughts that she was unusually quiet for a little time, during which her terrible eyes scanned every detail of Yseulte's appearance, from the pearl solitaire at her throat to the gold buckles in her shoes. Then, with a shriek of laughter, she cried aloud:

'Do you remember when you came first to us you had leather shoes—leather!—and no heels, and mamma sent you at once to have some proper shoes; and how you could not walk a step in them, and cried?'

'I remember,' said Yseulte good-humouredly, 'but I wonder you do—you were so little.'

'Oh, I never forget anything,' replied Blanchette, sagely. 'What beautiful feet you have now, and you are so grown, so grown! And I want to see all your jewels. Mamma says they are wonderful. I love jewels.'

'You shall see them, if you like, by-and-by. But you did see many before my marriage.'

'But mamma says he has given you ever so many more since —that you were covered with them at your ball.'

'He is always generous.'

Yseulte smiled as she spoke—the dreamy introspective smile of one who recalls happy hours.

'*Tope-là*, while it lasts,' said the small cynic before her.

'Hush,' said Yseulte, with some disgust.

'Papa never gives mamma anything,' pursued Blanchette. 'Papa gives heaps of things to Mdlle. Fraise; the one they call Rose Fraise. She plays; she has eyes like saucers; she is at the Variétés; she rides a roan horse in the Bois of a morning. Don't you go to the theatre every night? When I marry I shall have a box at every house. I have gone to Hengler's. Now show me the jewels, will you?'

To humour the child, Yseulte took her to her dressing-room, where the tortoiseshell and silver box, which was the outer shell of the iron fire-proof jewel case, was kept, and told her women to open it. Blanchette remained in an almost religious ecstasy before the treasures exposed to her adoring eyes. Nothing could awe this true child of her century except such a display as she now saw of ropes of pearls, streams of sapphires, emeralds green as the deep sea, diamonds in all possible settings, rare Italian jewels of the Renaissance, and Byzantine and Persian work of the rarest quality. She was, after an hour's worship, with difficulty persuaded to leave the spot where such divine objects were shut within their silver shrine defended by Chubb's locks.

'You *are* happy!' she said, with a sigh.

Yseulte glanced at a miniature of Othmar which stood near.

'That is worth them all!' she said, and then coloured, vexed that she had betrayed herself to the artificial, satirical mockery of the child.

But Blanchette did not hear; she was thinking of the great diamonds lying like planets and comets fallen out of the sky into their velvet beds.

'*Dis donc*,' she said abruptly, 'what is your budget for your toilettes? You would not tell me when you married; tell me now.'

'I do not think it concerns you, my dear, and your mamma knows,' replied Yseulte.

'Oh, it made mamma very angry; she said he gave you three times as much as she has; that is why I want to know what it is, because then I should know what hers is. And I know she is in debt so deep!' and Blanchette held her little hand high above her head. 'What is the first thing you ordered, Yesulte? Me, I should order a petticoat with valenciennes quite up to the top; like that they are three thousand francs each. Yours are like that? You have got them in all colours, and ever so many white satin ones too? If I were you, I should be all day long with the *lingères* and *costumiers*. Are you not with them all day long?'

'No, I have ordered nothing; I want nothing; I have such quantities of clothes;—if I live to be a hundred I shall never wear them out!——'

'Wear them out!' cried Blanchette, with a scream which was as inimitable as a shriek of Judic's or Jeanne Granier's. 'What an expression! One would think you were a doctor's wife in the provinces. You know you can never wear anything more than three times, and a *toilette du soir* never but once. Your maids surely tell you that?——'

'I wear what they put out,' said Yseulte, a little amused. 'But I doubt very much whether I shall ever care about *chiffons*; not in your sense of caring, Blanchette. Of course I like pretty things, but there are so many other ways of spending money.'

'What ways?' said the child sharply. 'Play? Horses? The Bourse? Or do you buy big jewels? It is very safe to buy big jewels; you can run away with them in revolution, sown in your stays——'

'There is so much to do for the poor,' said Yseulte, with a little hesitation; she feared to seem to boast of her own charity, yet she thought it wrong to let the child think that she spent all she had selfishly and frivolously.

Blanchette's little rosy mouth grinned.

'For the poor? One can *quêter*; that is always amusing. I stood at the door of S. Philippe after Mass last month, and I got such a bagful of napoleons, and I wore a frock *couleur de feu*, and a Henri-Trois hat, and Monseigneur himself kissed me—it was great fun—there was a crowd in the street, and one of them said, "'Est crâne, la pétiote!" It was a baker's boy said it; I threw him a napoleon out of the bag.'

'Oh, Blanchette!—out of the alms money!'

'Why not? I put a dragée in instead, and I dare say the boy was poor, or he wouldn't have had a basket on his head. Monseigneur said to mamma that I was one of the children of Heaven!'

And Blanchette made her *pied de nez*, and waltzed round on one foot.

'You could buy the whole of Siraudin's and not feel it,' she resumed enviously. 'You could buy half Paris they say; why don't you?'

'I have all I want,' said Yseulte; 'very much more than I want.'

'That is nonsense; one need never stop wishing——'

'One must be very ungrateful then,' said Yseulte. 'But you can wish as much as you like this morning; you shall have your wishes. Only I should like to hear you wish that Toinon were with you. Poor Toinon, at home with her sore throat!'

'I don't wish that at all,' said Blanchette sturdily. 'She pinches, she gobbles, and *she* is vulgar, if you like; she swears like the grooms. You know our rooms overlook the stables; we can hear all the men say when they are cleaning the horses. Toinon makes signals to the English tiger Bob, and he to her. Toinon will only marry someone who keeps a fine *meute* and good colours for a hunting-dress. She only lives for the Cours Hippique. She got her sore throat because she would go on M. de Rochmont's break when it was raining.'

'Poor Toinon! You ought to be so fond of each other. If I had had a sister——'

'Ah-bah!' said Blanchette; 'you would have hated her! I can never have a scrap of pleasure in a new frock because Toinon always has one too; I know I do not make half the effect I should do if I were all alone!'

'Hush! If Toinon died, only think how sorry you would be!'

Blanchette laughed in silence; she did not dare to say so, but she thought that if Toinon did die it would be a bore in one way, because death always dressed one in black, and shut one up in the house; but otherwise—there were quantities of Toinon's things which she would like to possess herself, and in especial a set of pink coral, which Toinon's godmother, the Queen of Naples, had given her, which was delicious. Blanchette's own godmother was but little use to her, being a most religious and most rigid Marquise, who dwelt on her estates in a lonely part of La Vendée, and only made her presents of holy books and crucifixes and relics in little antique boxes.

'Do you know, Yseulte,' she continued, with her persistent prattle as she hopped round the room, examining and appraising as accurately as a dealer at the Drouot the treasures which it contained, 'they make bets about you at the clubs? How nice that is! Nobody is anything in Paris till the clubs do that. Papa and the Marquis have a hundred thousand francs on it, and mamma laughs;—they think I don't hear these things, but I do.'

'Bets on me?' repeated Yseulte in wonder. 'Why should they bet about me?'

'Oh, they bet as to whether you will be the first to *flanquer* Count Othmar, or he you. They often make that sort of bet

when people marry. Papa is all for you; he says you will be *flanquée*, and bear it like an angel—"like a two-sous print of S. Marie!" said mamma.'

Yseulte coloured with natural indignation.

'You have no right to repeat such things if you hear them, Blanchette,' she said, with only a vague idea of the child's meaning. 'You might make great mischief. If Count Othmar were to know——'

'Bah!' said Blanchette. 'You will not tell him. You are in love with him; they all say so; it is what they laugh at; it is what they bet about—how long it will last, who will get him away first, what you will do, whether you will take someone else. Papa says you will not; mamma says you will: they quarrel ever so often about it. You see,' continued Blanchette, with her mixture of *blasé* cynicism and childish naïveté, which made her say the most horrible things with only a half perception of their meaning, 'they all only marry for that, to be able to take someone else; that is why it does not matter if one's husband is as old as the Pont Neuf and as ugly as Punch. You happen to be in love with yours, and he is handsome; but it only makes them laugh, and he was never in love with you—mamma says so; he married you because he was angry with Madame Napraxine, and he wanted to do something to vex her.'

Blanchette, who was given to such ruthless analysis of other people, did not dissect her own emotions, so that she was ignorant of the malice which actuated her speech, of the unconscious longing which moved her to put a thorn in the rose. She wanted all those jewels for herself! She knew very well she could not have them, that she would be laughed at by Toinon and everybody if it were known she wished for them; still, the longing for them made it pleasant to her to plant her little poisoned dagger in the happy breast of her cousin. But she paused, for once frightened at the sudden paleness of her cousin's face.

Yseulte gave a little low cry, like a wounded animal; she felt the air grow grey, the room go round her, for a moment, with the intensity of her surprise, the shock of her pain. But in another moment she recovered herself; she repulsed, almost without pausing to examine it, a suspicion which was an offence to himself and her. She laid her hand on the little gay figure of the cruel child, and stopped her in her airy circuit of the room, with a gesture so grave, a rebuke so calm, that even Blanchette was awed.

'My little cousin,' she said, with an authority and a serenity which seemed all at once to add a score of years to her age, 'you can jest with me, and at me, as much as ever you like; I shall forgive it and I shall never forget all I owed once to your mother; but if you venture to speak again of my husband without respect, I shall not forgive it. I shall close his house to you, and I shall tell your parents why I do so.'

Blanchette looked furtively up in her face, and understood that she was not to be trifled with. She began to whimper, and then to laugh, and then to murmur in the coaxing way she had when she had been most in fault.

'How grand you have grown, and how old in twelve months! You know I only talked nonsense; I never heard them say a word; I only wanted to teaze you; it is so silly, you see, Yseulte, to be so in love with M. Othmar, it is so bourgeoise and so stupid, and they all say that it is not the way to keep him. Me, when I marry, I will always make my husband call me Madame, and I will never let him touch but the tip of my little finger, and I will eat oysters every day, and drive the horse that wins the Grand Prix in my basket in the Bois. *Dis, donc!* you will not tell mamma I said anything naughty?'

'I shall not tell her,' said Yseulte, who could not so quickly smile. She felt as if someone had run a needle straight through her heart.

Blanchette laid her curly head against her cousin's breast:

'I do love you, Yseulte,' she murmured. 'You are always true, and you are always kind, and you are so handsome, so handsome! Mercié, and all the sculptors say so; and all the painters too. The Salon will be full of your busts and your portraits; Madame Napraxine is only a pale woman with great black eyes like coals in a figure of snow——'

'I desire you not to speak of Madame Napraxine!' said Yseulte, with a violence which startled herself and momentarily shook her self-control.

The child, who had ignorantly meant to atone and to console for her previous offence, was genuinely alarmed at her failure.

'I only meant that you are much prettier, much handsomer, than she is,' she stammered.

'Madame Napraxine's beauty is celebrated,' said Yseulte, with enforced calmness. 'Leave off your habit of indulging in personalities, Blanchette; it is a very vulgar fault, and it makes you malicious for the pleasure of fancying yourself witty. Come and feed my peacocks; they are birds who will recommend themselves to your esteem, for they are intensely vain, artificial, and egotistic; they believe flowers only grow that they may pull them to pieces.'

'I don't care for the peacocks,' said Blanchette. 'Drive me in the Bois in the *Daumont* with the four white horses, and you can buy me something at Siraudin's as we go.'

'As you like,' said Yseulte.

Yseulte humoured the child's caprices, and drove her out into the cold sparkling air with the four white horses, with their postillions in black velvet caps and jackets, which Blanchette condescended to praise as the most *chic* thing in all Paris. It was on the tip of her tongue to say that they were even more *chic* than

the Napraxine black horses and Russian coachman, but she restrained herself, unwilling to offend her cousin before they stopped on their return from the Bois at Giroux's, at Siraudin's, and at Fontane's, for Blanchette was too sensible to be satisfied with toys and bonbons, and set her affections on three monkeys in silver-gilt, playing at see-saw on a tree trunk of jade, with little caps made of turquoises on their heads.

When she had chattered herself tired, and the day was declining, she consented to allow herself to be driven home, and Yseulte returned alone to the Boulevard St.-Germain. For the first time since her marriage her heart was heavy. The selfishness and greed of her little companion were nothing new to her, but they had been made painfully evident in that drive through Paris; and the wound which the child had given her still smarted, as the bee-sting throbs after the insect has flown away. It was not that she believed what was said; she was too loyal and too innocently sure of her husband's affection to dishonour him by such suspicion. Yet the mere knowledge that such things were said of him and herself hurt her delicacy and her pride cruelly, and she knew well that, if the Duchesse de Vannes said so, then the world said so too. And her heart contracted as she thought involuntarily, 'Why should they speak of Madame Napraxine at all in connection with me, unless—unless he had loved her?'

Yseulte was too young to think with composure of the women who had preceded herself in the affections of her husband; she could not console herself, as older or colder women would have done, with the reflection that every man has many passions, and that the past should be a matter of indifference to one who was indissolubly united with his present and his future. To her it seemed that if he had ever loved anyone else he could not care for her; all the ignorance and exaggeration of youth made this seem a certainty to her.

She was no longer the calm and innocent child that she had been at Millo; the passions of humanity had become to stir in her; love, the great creator and the great destroyer, had taken possession of her, and had roused in her impulses, jealousies, desires, of whose existence she had never dreamed; her temperament, naturally sweet and spiritual, had beneath it unknown springs of ardour and of passions: *le vin mousseux*, which her cousin Alain had said was latent in her blood from the impetuous and voluptuous race of her fathers. She could not wholly recover from the shock which she had received, as from a bolt that fell from sunny skies. It had been only a child's frothy foolish chatter, no doubt; yet the mere suggestion made in it clung to her memory with a cruel and terrible persistency. She did not doubt that the child had only repeated what she had heard; she knew that Blanchette's memory was as retentive as a telephone; and if the Duchesse de Vannes had said it, then the world had

thought it. She had not allowed Blanchette to perceive the pain that she had caused; but as her horses had flashed through the chill bright frosty air of Paris, and the child's gay shrill voice had chattered incessantly beside her, she had suffered the first moments of anguish that she had known since her marriage. As she drove now through the streets of Paris, in which the lamps were beginning to sparkle through the red of the winter sunset, she felt a strange sense of solitude amidst those gay and hurrying crowds through which her postboys forced their fretting horses.

At Amyôt, on the days when Othmar had left her, she had never felt alone; she had amused herself with the dogs, the birds, the horses, the woods; she had dreamed over her classic music, or read some book which he had recommended, and spent hours looking from the balustrade of the great terrace, or from the embrasure of a window to watch for the first appearance in the avenue of the horses which should bring him from the station of Beaugency. She had never felt alone at Amyôt, but here in the city which she loved from the associations of childhood, and as the scene of her marriage, in this city which regarded her as one of the most fortunate of its favourites of fortune, she felt a sense of utter loneliness as the carriage rolled through the gates.

The *Suisse* told her that Othmar had not come home.

She went upstairs to her boudoir and threw off her close-fitting coat of sables and her sable hat, and sat down beside the olive-wood fire, drawing off her long gloves. The room was softly lighted with a rose-tinted light which shone on the gay children painted by Bougereau, the flowered satin of the curtains and couches, the Dresden frames of the mirrors, the marqueterie of the tables and consoles, the bouquets of roses of all growths and colours. She looked round it with a little sigh; with the same sense of chillness and sadness. Everything in it seemed to echo the cruel words: 'He only married you to anger her!'

In the morning the whole chamber had seemed to smile at her from all the thousand trifles, which spoke in it of his tender thoughtfulness for herself; now, the roses in their bowls, the children on their panels, the amorini holding up the mirrors, the green parrots swinging in their rings, all seemed to say with one voice, 'What if he never loved you?'

Her arms rested on her knees and her face on her hands, as she sat in a low chair before the fire which burned under white marble friezes of the Daphnephoria, carved by the hand of Clésinger. She could never ask him, she could never ask anyone, of this cruel doubt, which had come into her perfect peace as a worm comes into a rose. All her pride shrank from the thought of laying bare such a wound. Not even in the confessional could she have brought herself to breathe a whisper of it. She was not yet seventeen years old, and she had already a doubt which, like the pains of maternity, she must shut in her heart and bear as

best she might alone. She had both courage and resignation in her nature, and she needed both.

'It is impossible!' she murmured unconsciously, half aloud, as the memory of a thousand caresses and gestures, which seemed to her to be proof of the most absolute love, came to her thoughts with irresistible persuasion, and made her face grow warm with blushes even in her solitude. It was impossible that he did not love her—he who had been free to choose from the whole world.

'It is impossible!' she murmured, with her head lifted as though in some instinct of combat against some unseen foe.

'What is impossible?' said Othmar, as he entered the room and approached behind her, unseen until he had drawn her head backward and kissed her on the eyes. 'What is impossible, my child?' he repeated. 'No wish of yours if you tell it to me.'

She coloured very much, and rose, and remained silent. Her heart was beating fast; she did not know what to reply. By the light of the fire he did not see how red she grew and then how pale. He seated himself in a low chair and took her by the hand.

'What is so impossible,' he said carelessly, 'that you dream of it in my absence in the dark?'

'Nothing—at least—I would rather not say,' she murmured.

'As you like,' said Othmar. 'You know I am not Blue Beard, my dear.'

A great longing rushed through her to tell him what the Duchesse de Vannes had said, and ask him if it were true or false—he who alone could know the secrets of his own heart—but sensitiveness, timidity, delicacy, pride, all made her mute. What use would it be to ask him? He would never wound her with the truth if the truth were what her cousin had said.

Othmar smiled kindly as he looked at her; she did not know that if he had loved her more he would have been more curious before this, her first secret, less willingly resigned to be shut out from her confidence.

'Who has been with you to-day?' he asked. 'Oh, I remember, you have had little Blanchette. What a terrible child! She is an Elzevir compendium of the century. Has she said anything to vex you? She is as malicious as Mascarille——'

Yseulte touched his hand timidly. There was a grain of fear in her adoration of him, that fear which enters into all great love, though Nadine Napraxine and Madame de Vannes would have ridiculed it as 'jeu de lac et de nacelle,' the 'vieux jeu' of the romanticists and sentimentalists.

'You do love me?' she said, very low, with much hesitation, while her colour deepened.

Othmar looked up quickly with a certain irritation.

'Has that pert baby told you to doubt it? Can that be a question between you and me? My dear child, would you be by me now if I did not do so?'

And he soothed her agitation by those caresses with which a man can so easily and with pleasure to himself counterfeit warmth and tenderness to a woman who has youth and grace and cheeks as soft as the wing of a bird.

'Yseulte,' he said gravely a few moments later, 'do not listen to what other women say to you; if you do, you will lose your beautiful serenity and fret yourself vainly by doubts and fancies. There is nothing on earth so cruel to a woman as women. They envy you—not for me—but for what you possess through me and for the face and form with which nature has dowered you. Do not let them poison your peace. I am not afraid that they will corrupt your heart, but I am afraid that they may distress and disturb you. We cannot live all our lives in seclusion at Amyôt, and the world must come about you soon or late. To be in the world means to be surrounded with jealousies, cruelties, enmities, ingratitude, and malice; if we once lend our ear to what these will tell us, we shall have no more happiness. You have been like your favourite, S. Ignace; by reason of your own purity you have been allowed to hear the angels sing. Do not let the world's clamour drown that divine song, for once lost no one ever hears it again! Do you understand what I mean, my dear?'

She said nothing, but she hid her face on his breast and burst into tears, the first that he had ever seen from her eyes.

'Can they not let her alone,' he thought with anger, and a sense of weariness and apprehension. If the world taught her what men's love could be, would she not discover what was missing in his?

CHAPTER XXXVI.

When the three black horses of the Princess Napraxine, with their manes flying in the wind, their eyes flashing, and their nostrils breathing fire, dashed down the Champs Elysées to make the tour du Bois, all Paris looked after her, and multitudes who only knew her by repute took off their hats to her as they had used to do in a bygone time to the golden-haired empress.

'Ah, if I had been in that woman's place in 'seventy-one,' she thought once, 'I would not have run away in a cab with Evans the dentist; I would have put on a white gown and all my diamonds, and gone out before them on to the terrace of the Tuileries—they would have forgotten Sedan, and would have worshipped me! I cannot forgive people who have the happiness of great opportunities for not rising to be equal to them. One can but die once, and it must be essentially delightful to die amidst a roll of drums, a blaze of sunset, a storm of welcome. The death of Desaix at Marengo is the ideal death.'

There was at the bottom of her soul, despite her languor, ennui, and pessimism, a certain heroic element; life seemed to her so poor a thing, so stupid, so illogical, that if it went out in fire it vindicated itself in a measure.

'Sometimes, do you know,' she said once to a sympathetic companion, 'I think I might have been something great if I had been born in the time for it; all depends upon that. Mdlle. de Sombreuil would have lived and died like ten thousand other Frenchwomen, in the monotony of the *vie de château*, if she had not happened to be alive under the Terror. What possibility of any greatness is there for a woman who lives nowadays in what calls itself the great world? The very men who have any genius in it are dwarfed by it. Modern life is so trivial, yet so absorbing; it is such a bed of down and such a bed of prickles; it is such a sleeping-potion and such a whip of nettles, that we have no time to think about anything but itself. You must live "à l'abri des hommes," if you want to be of higher stature than they are. Bismarck is a colossus, because he shuts himself up in Varzin so constantly. It is very hard even for men to resist the presence of the world; even Tennyson leaves Farringford in the primrose month to court a vulgar apotheosis in the London drawing-rooms; and for a woman who finds herself from birth upwards in that *milieu* there is no resistance possible. We are born to dress, to drive, to dine, to dance, to set the fashion in all kinds of things—and that is all. If we are clever, we do mischief in meddling with the hidden cards of diplomacy or statecraft, and if we are light-minded we do a different manner of mischief in making all sorts of vices look pretty and distinguished to those below us, who are always endeavouring to imitate us; but more than that we cannot do. The morphine has been injected into our veins; we cannot resist its influence; there is a kind of excitement and somnolence, both at once, in the routine of our world which none of us can resist. If we have any brains, perhaps we make resolutions to resist, but we do not keep them; the world we live in is idiotic but it is irresistible. When we wake, we see the heap of invitation cards on our table; we yawn, but we yield, and we fill up our book of engagements; the day is crowded, so is the year; and so life slips away hurried, tired, thinking itself amused. Sometimes I think I should like to live amongst the corn-fields and the larchwoods, and do good, and I dare say I shall when I am old, or, what is still worse than old, middle-aged. But you know one does not do good in that way; one always gets imposed on, and the Jew moneylender in the centre of the village would be really the person who would profit by one's charities. It is quite easy for stupid people to be happy; they believe in fables and they trot on in a beaten track like a horse on a tramway. But when you have some intelligence, and have read something besides your breviary, and have studied the philosophy of life a little, it is much more difficult

to content yourself. My friends who are putting on blisters and bandages at the hospitals, fancy they are on the way to eternal salvation, but a political economist would tell them that they were only doing a vast deal of mischief, upsetting the nicely-balanced arrangements of Nature. Myself, I think Nature has very little to do with the world as it is in the nineteenth century in Europe. I do not think Nature, left to herself, would create either cripples or cancers, any more than she would yoke bullocks or cut terriers' tails.'

She had accompanied her friends the Dames du Calvaire more than once to those hospitals where patrician hands touched the leper's sores and the idiot's ulcers; but her delicate taste had been revolted, and her intelligence, nurtured on shrewd and satiric philosophies, had rejected the idea that any good was done by great ladies transforming themselves into sick nurses of disease. She thought it must be infinitely delightful to be able to delude yourself in that kind of way, to think that you pleased Deity by putting on a poultice and averted a social cataclysm by washing a cretin, but she did not believe in that kind of thing herself. She did not see how anyone could do so who had thought about life, and the rest of it.

'I dare say I am quite useless,' she would reply to those who tried to convince her, 'but then so many things are. Who has ever found out the use of butterflies, or of daisies, or of a nautilus, or of a nightingale, or of those charming rosy clouds which drift about at sunset? I do not see the utility of prolonging the horrible and miserable lives of lepers and of idiots in hospitals and asylums. Humanity is not in the least sacred; it is much more often profoundly noxious and disgusting. Even the people who talk about its sanctity, do not believe in what they say, or war would become an impossibility, and so would all the factories which, as Victor Hugo has said, take the soul out of man to put it into machinery.'

When she spoke in this way she was very much in earnest, and her arguments were very hard to refute; and even Melville went out of her presence with an uncomfortable, though unacknowledged, sense that his whole life had been a mistake based on a bubble which had all the hues of the rainbow, indeed, but no more than a bubble's solidity. When the men of science, with whom she sometimes amused herself by playing the part of the great Catherine to the Encyclopædists, came into her presence, they fared no better than the priests, and she did not believe in them a whit the more.

'Five hundred years hence, your ideas and your discoveries will all be refuted and ridiculed,' she said to them, 'as you now refute and ridicule the physiology of the Greeks and Latins; you will not find the key to the mystery of creation by torturing dogs or chaining horses on a bed of agony.'

And she listened to them, but she laughed at them. To the

satirical clearness of her highly-trained intelligence the delirium of science was quite as much a malady of the mind as were the rhapsodies of religion.

'La science est la grande névrose du moment; ça passera,' she said once to Claude Bernard.

In Paris, Nadine Napraxine was what the world had made her; she was the *élégante* of her period, a hothouse flower of fragile beauty, of absolute indolence, of hypercritical taste, of utter and entire uselessness. In her carriage or her sleigh, under her pile of silver fox skins; on a Tuesday at the Français, on a Saturday at the Grand Opéra; on her Thursdays at her 'cinq heures,' when the most exclusive of crowds gathered in her drawing-rooms; in the few great assemblies and balls to which she deigned to carry her listless grace and her marvellous jewels; throughout her self-absorbed day, which began at noon and ended at dawn, she was a *cocodette* of the most exquisite grace and of the most incredible extravagance, such as Paris had known her to be from the second year of her marriage. Her caprices were unending, her changefulness was incalculable, her expenditure was enormous; the most exaggerated tales were told of her hauteur and of her exclusiveness, yet were not much beyond the truth; and men worshipped her, and women intrigued for her notice, just because she was so unapproachable and could be insolent. Fragile and white as the narcissus flower, which she always took as her emblem, with a voice ever sweet and low, and the most perfect manner in the world, she could be as cruel in all the cruelties of society as ever her ancestors had been with knout and steel in their frosty fastnesses. It amused her to see the timid recoil, the presumptuous shrink, the confident wither into humiliation, before the chillness of her smile, the terror of her few cold softly-spoken words.

'I am the only scavenger that Europe has left,' she said once. 'All the others have been frightened by the democracy, but I frighten the democracy, or, at least, I keep it out of my drawing-rooms. It may get into the "Almanac de Gotha," but it will not get past my *Suisse* and up my staircase.'

Now and then she had been known to do exceedingly kind things, just as in the midst of her worldly life she would go now and then to a discourse at the Academy or to a séance at the Sorbonne. But they had been always done to persons quite simple and frank, who never affronted her with presumption or disgusted her with pretension. To a lie of any sort she was inexorable.

The Hôtel Napraxine was one of the most delightful houses in Europe. It stood near the entrance of the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, and was withdrawn from every inquisitive glance which might be cast on it from the road, within gardens large enough to contain groves of lime trees and plane trees, fountains, lawns, pavilions, and terraces of rose-coloured marbles. No disturbing

echo of the traffic of Paris could reach the sensitive ear of its sovereign lady when she sank to sleep under the white satin of her shell-shaped ivory bed.

All the finest French artists living had been summoned to its adornment within.

'All modern rooms are only like so many bonbon-boxes,' she had said. 'At least my bonbon-boxes shall be well-painted.'

And Meissonier, Duran, Baudry, Cabanel, Henner, Legros, had all signed some panel, some ceiling, some staircase, chimney-piece, or salon-wall in this most exquisite of houses.

'It is really charming,' she said to herself when she reached it on that first grey, chill, misty morning of her arrival, and its delicious colour and warm air and flower-filled twilight welcomed her after the long dull journey across Europe. It was especially perfect to her this day because for some fifty hours at least her husband would not come thither. There was only one thing ever discordant in its perfect harmonies. When Platon Napraxine came up the staircase—with its black-and-white marbles, its pale-blue velvet carpets, its sculptures by Clésinger, and its wall-paintings by Baudry—when he came up under the leaves of the bananas and the palms, and entered her own sanctuary, his broad tall form, his heavy step, his Kalmuck face were dissonant and absurd in it all, and irritated her sense of fitness, and annoyed her like a false note in the middle of a classic symphony.

'Poor Platon!' she thought more than once; 'I have certainly been the most expensive whim that he has ever had; and he has never got the slightest entertainment out of me. I am very disagreeable to him; I have always been disagreeable to him. I was so at first because I could not help it, and I am so now because I like to be so. But I grant that it has never been quite fair to him. He might just as well have been all alone to amuse himself with his dancers, and comic singers, and people; I have been a white elephant to him. Certainly he has a kind of triumph in possessing the white elephant; he likes to feel I am here; when they all look after me in the Bois, or at the Opéra, he likes to think I belong to him. As somebody said, when people admire what is ours, it is as if they admired us. I am very much to him what the *bleu ciel* Sèvres for which he gave ten thousand pounds must be to Lord Dudley. The Sèvres is of no earthly use to him, and he would scarcely dare to touch it, and he would certainly never eat his cutlet or have his venison served on it; but it is something that everybody envies him, that nobody else has. When Platon gives great dinners to sovereigns and all kinds of *gros bonnets*, and I am opposite to him, I am sure he has the sort of feeling that Lord Dudley has about that *blue ciel* service. After all, that is something; though, as the service was incomplete in quantity, so I am incomplete in sentiment. And then, when I meet him driving Mdlle. Chose in the Champs Elysées, I

seem as if I did not see him; and I never say a syllable of objection if there are a hundred paragraphs in the *petits journaux* about himself and any number of Mdlles. Chose. If I had ever liked him, I should be angry and make a fuss. After all, he ought to know that, if indifference be not flattery, it is peace.'

So she soothed her conscience, but not always successfully; she had occasionally a passing touch of self-reproach, when she remembered how very little she had given her husband in return for the magnificent fortune, the boundless admiration, and the perfect independence which she owed to him. She had at the bottom of her heart, though stifled and indistinct, a more sensitive and a higher-toned honour than most women; that instinct of honour told her that she had been, at all times, unjust and ungrateful to a man whose good qualities she refused to see, and even did her best to destroy, because his relation to her irritated her taste and temper, and his ugliness and want of intelligence filled her with disdain.

'If I had a daughter,' she thought, in those moments of candour and compunction, 'I think I should say to her, "Commit any sin and incur any sorrow you like rather than make a marriage without sympathy; it is the one crime which society has agreed to applaud as an act of wisdom and of virtue; but it is a crime nevertheless. One is so young, one does not know; one listens to people who urge all the advantages of it, and when one does know it is too late." However,' she added in her own musings, 'I dare say, if I had daughters, when they were old enough, I should do just the same as everybody else does; I should want them to make a *beau mariage*, and I should tell them to do it. It is the world which makes one like that. At the fair of Novgorod I once saw a little Simbirsh peasant arrested for stealing a necklace of blue and yellow beads; she burst out sobbing, and said she would not have taken it, but all the girls of her village had all their big beads, and she had none! In the big world we do the same. We want the big beads because other people have theirs. It is paltry; but then society is paltry at its best. They say, when you have entered an opium house, you may have made all the resolutions you will against smoking, you cannot keep them, the atmosphere gains on you, you yield, and smoke, and sink, like all the rest. The world is an opium house.'

Nature had designed her for something better than the opium house. Her intellect, her courage, and her chastity were all of great and fine quality, like the burnished blade of a sword, that is at once delicate and strong. But the world had absorbed her, and left little scope to those higher and nobler instincts. She was in her habits and her tastes a mere *élégante*, indolent, hard to please, hypercritical, of languid constitution, of infinite egotism. Given the impetus, this languor could alter, as by magic, into ardour, force, and energy; but the motive power could rarely be

found which could rouse her, and she remained for the most part of her time a mere *mondaine*, of exquisite taste, of irresistible seduction, but useless, idle, contemptuous, cynical, vaguely disappointed, though all were at her feet, wanting, petulantly, like Alexander, more worlds to conquer. Sometimes in the ennui of the whole thing, and her dissatisfaction in it, she was only restrained from absolute evil by the consciousness of its vulgarity, and her own aversion to those indulgences in which most find their strongest temptation, but in which she only saw a humiliating and a grotesque affinity to the brutes.

As at four years old she had shrugged her small shoulders, with a sigh, before the bonbon boxes—'J'en ai tant!'—so at four-and-twenty years old she was supercilious to the whole world because it had given her so much, and yet had nothing better than that to give. And incredulous that there was anywhere anything better, she lived in her calorifère-heated rooms, like an orchid in a hothouse, and amused herself as with a game by the desires, the pains, the reproaches, the solicitations, the jealousies, which fretted and fumed themselves in that arena of her salon, whilst she remained as tranquil, as pitiless, and as indifferent as fate.

No woman had the world more completely beneath her feet, yet she, like Othmar, was consumed by that eternal ennui which is the penalty of those who possess too much, have seen and heard too much too early, and have been from childhood the objects of adulation and of speculation;—of all those, indeed, who have mind and heart enough not to find all their interests in society, and yet have not that poetic temper which would give them a sure consolation and a safe refuge in the uncloying loveliness of nature.

Ennui is unjustly looked upon as the characteristic of the frivolous type of humanity; on the contrary, the frivolous character is perfectly content with frivolity, and never tires of it. Ennui is rather the mark of those whose taste is too fine and whose instincts are too high to let them be satisfied with the excitement of, and the victories of, society, and yet who have too little of that simplicity, or of that impersonality, which makes the artistic temperament capable of entirely withdrawing from the world and living its own life, self-sustained.

This delicate patrician had the seed in her of great *roués*, of dauntless conspirators, of haughty territorial tyrants, of men and of women who had emptied thrones and filled them, and given law for life and death to multitudes of vassals; she could not be altogether content with the rose-water politics of modern drawing-rooms, with the harmless rivalry of toilettes and equipages, with the trivial pastimes and as trivial passions of society. She was a woman of the world to the tips of her fingers, yet she could not be altogether content with an existence of Courts, *chiffons*, flirtations, endless entertainments, and unlimited expenditure.

'They find us eccentric, capricious, autocratic, us Russians,' she said one day. 'I dare say we are so; they forget that, not a century ago, our great-grandparents were slaying Paul and Peter in their palaces, and could knout to death whole villages of men, women, and children, at their mere freak and fancy. I think it is very creditable to us not to be a thousand times worse than we are; our blood is made up of arack and of ice; we are the rude pines of the north French-polished!'

It was three o'clock in the day; she had given orders to be undisturbed. She had slept admirably for eight hours without any morphine. She had bathed twice, on her arrival and on her awaking, in warm water, opaque with otto of rose; she had breakfasted off her usual cup of cream and rolls made of milk. She was in a dreamy, drowsy, amused state of thought; and, as she lay on her couch in the boudoir, which was placed between her library and her dressing-chamber, her thoughts drifted persistently to the meeting of the dawn.

She felt very like Fate now, as she thought how odd it was that the first person she had met in Paris had been Othmar.

'He is very much changed for so short a time. He is not a whit more content,' she reflected, with pleasure.

The little room was the prettiest thing in all Paris. 'It is a casket for a pearl,' one of her adorers had said, and it seemed really a pity that for eight months out of the year the casket should be closed, and no ray of light ever enter in it. Its furniture was of ivory, like that of the adjoining library, bedroom, and bathroom, and its hangings were of silvery satin embroidered with pale roses and apple-blossoms. Baudry had painted the ceiling with the story of Ædon and Procris: the glass in the windows was milk white, and the floor was covered with white bearskins: the atmosphere was like that of a hothouse, and as odorous; there were always a perfect seclusion and silence in it; the only sound which ever came there was the splash of a fountain in the garden below; it might have been set in the heart of the island of Alcina rather than in one of the great avenues of Paris. Here, lying back on one of her low couches with the air around her tropical, vaporous, dreamy, she mused within herself as to how she would deal with Othmar, a smile in her eyes and a doubt in her mind.

'Let him alone,' said her conscience.

'No,' said her vanity, and perhaps some other emotion also.

'He never harmed you; he only loved you, and obeyed you, and went away,' her conscience urged on her. But her vanity replied: 'That was the worst offence. There are commands which are most honoured by disobedience. There are wounds which ought to be cherished, not healed.'

Unless she chose that it should be otherwise, Othmar, she knew, would be a stranger to her all his life. They would meet,

perhaps, in the world very often, but they would exchange commonplace courtesy, and remain as far asunder as two ships that pass each other on the same ocean course, unless she chose. Her better self said to her, 'Let him alone; he has tried to make another life for himself; he has failed, no doubt, but he has probably found a sort of peace, a kind of affection; if it can console him, do not disturb it.' But the habits of supremacy and of intrigue, the love of dominion, the intolerance of opposition, which were instinctive in her, and which all her many triumphs and her permitted egotism had fostered and confirmed, forbade her to resign herself to such passivity, and urged her to take up her empire over his life.

And she had a vague wish to see him there again beside her, a wish not very strong, but strong enough to move her. It was here, in this room, that he had first of all told her that he loved her, with words more daring and more imperious than any other had ventured to use in her presence; he was never like other people; he was probably no better, certainly no worse, than other men, but he was different: he pleased her imagination, he touched her sympathy; he was the only man with whom it had ever seemed to her that her life might have been lived harmoniously, with whom she might have understood something of that mystery of love in which she had never believed. To her temper it was the intrigue and intricacy of life which alone made it endurable, the unrolling of the ribbon of fate, the watching and controlling of the comedy of circumstances, which alone made it worth while to rise in the morning to the tedium of its routine.

'Is life worth living?' she said once, hearing of the title of a book of drawing-room philosophy. 'Yes, I think it is, if you are the cat, if you are the spider, if you are the eagle, if you are the dog; not if you are the mouse, or the fly, or the lamb, or the hare. Life is certainly worth living, too, if you regard it as what it is, a dramatic entertainment, diversion. This is the true use of riches, that it enables you to give yourself up to watching and controlling circumstances as if men and women were marionettes; it enables you to sit in your fauteuil and look on without moving unless you wish. I think that life must be always rather tiresome to anybody over ten years old, but the only possible way to endure it is to regard it as a spectacle, as a comedy, or, as Manteuffel has said, that a general sitting in his saddle regards the battlefield he governs.'

This was what she said and felt in her cynical moods, and she was cynical now on her return to Paris; she had left her better self behind her in the snow-drifts of her own country. The woman who had spoken so tenderly of Boganof scarcely existed in her; she lived in an atmosphere of adulation, excitation, ennui, and frivolous occupations. The heroic protectress of the Siberian exile had scarcely a trait in common with her; she spent half the

day in the discussion of new costumes with her tailors, and the other half surrounded by flatterers and courtiers in the pursuit of new distractions.

Analysis was so natural to her that it seemed to her in no situation or even crisis of her life would she have abandoned it. There is a well-known physiologist, now head of a famous laboratory, who, when his son died, a boy of twelve, scarcely waited for the child's last breath to plunge his scalpel into the still warm body in hopes of some discovery of the law of life.[1] If she had had any emotions she would have done a similar thing; she would have dissected them even if they had sprung from her own life blood.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

'Is Madame Napraxine a good woman?' said Yseulte timidly one day in her own drawing-room to Melville, whilst she coloured to the eyes as she pronounced the name.

'Good, my dear!' echoed Friederich Othmar, who overheard and replied to the question. 'The epithet is comically incongruous. She would be as horrified if she heard you as if you called her *ma bourgeoise.*'

Melville laughed a little despite himself, and hesitated before giving his own reply: he was embarrassed. How could he as a priest say to this innocent creature what he as a man of the world knew to be the truth; that the simple classifications of good and bad can no more suffice to describe the varieties of human character than the shepherd's simple names for herb and flower can suffice for the botanist's floral nomenclature and complicated subdivisions.

'She has very noble qualities,' he said at length. 'Perhaps they are somewhat obscured by the habits of the world. She is of an exceedingly complicated character. I fear I scarcely know her well enough to describe her with perfect correctness. But I know some noble acts of her life; one I may tell you.'

And he related to her the episode of Boganof.

Yseulte listened with wonder: to her youthful imagination her one enemy appeared in all the dark hues with which youth ever paints what it dislikes and dreads, exaggerated like the rainbow light with which it decks what it loves. All the highest instincts of her nature were touched to sympathy by what she now heard, but a pain of which Melville knew nothing contracted her heart as she thought that if her husband had indeed loved such a woman as this, it was natural that she would for ever retain her power on him.

[1] A fact.

'And she is so beautiful!' she added, with a little sigh. Melville looked at her in surprise.

'Who has been talking to her?' he wondered as he said aloud:

'There are women more beautiful. You have but to look in your mirror, my child. But she has a surpassing grace, an incomparable fascination, some of which springs, perhaps, from her very defects. She is a woman essentially of the modern type, all nerves and scepticism intermingled; ironical, incredulous, indifferent, yet capable of heroic *coups de tête*; dissatisfied with the worldly life and yet incapable of living any other; the Réné of Chateaubriand, made female and left without a God.'

'Except her tailor!' said Friederich Othmar, who approached the little nook in which Melville was seated in the boudoir.

'Pardon me,' said Melville, with a smile. 'Madame Napraxine's tailor is but her slave, like everyone else whom she employs or encounters. The king of *couturiers* trembles before her, he is so afraid of her displeasure; if she blame his creations they are ruined. She makes *la pluie et le beau temps* in the world of fashion.'

'And yet she could do what you say for that unhappy man in Siberia?' murmured Yseulte, who had listened with seriousness and some perplexity to all that had been said of one in whom her instinct felt was the enemy of her life.

'You should understand a character which is made up of contradictions, my dear,' interrupted the Baron; 'for you have one beside you every day in Otho's. Your own is formed with just a few broad, simple, fair lines, ruled very straight on the old pattern, which was in use before the Revolution, or even farther back than that, in the days of Anne of Bretagne and of Blanche of Castille. But your husband's—and some other people's—is a tangled mass of unformed desires and of widely-opposed qualities which are for ever in conflict, and are as unsatisfactory and as indefinite as any *impressionniste's* picture.'

Yseulte did not hear; she was absorbed in her own reflections; her face was very grave.

'M. le Baron, you cannot have everything,' said Melville, gaily. 'Your age has destroyed the *femme croyante*. Nature, which always avenges herself, gives you the *femme du monde*, which, in its lowest stages, becomes the *cabotine*, and in its highest just such an ethereal, capricious, tantalising combination of the finest culture and the most languid scepticism, as captivates and tortures her world in the person of the Princess Napraxine.'

'Excuse me in my turn if I say that you are quite mistaken,' said Friederich Othmar. 'The two species of womankind have existed since the days of Athens and of Rome, and modern theology and modern scepticism have nothing to do with either of them. Penelope and Circe are as old as the islands and the seas. If you

will not find me impertinent, I cannot help saying that ecclesiastics always remind me of the old story (I think it is in Moore's Diary) of the grazier's son who went to Switzerland, and was only impressed by one fact—that bullocks were very cheap there. Christianity is a purely modern thing. What are eighteen centuries in the history of the world? Yet every churchman refers every virtue and every vice of human nature to the influence or the absence of this purely modern creed, which has, after all, not one tenth of the magnetic power of absorption of Buddhism and nothing like the grasp on the mind of a multitude which Islamism has possessed.'

Friederich Othmar had always an especial pleasure in teazing Melville, and in contemplating the address with which the trained talent of the theologian vaulted over the difficulties which his reason was forced to acknowledge.

As Melville was about to reply, the groom of the chambers entered and announced 'Madame la Princesse Napraxine.'

Yseulte rose with a startled look upon her young face, which was not yet trained to conceal what she felt beneath that mask of serenity and smiling indifference which makes the most impenetrable of all masks. Her cheeks flushed, her eyes had a momentary look of bewilderment. She did not hear the words of graceful greeting with which her visitor answered the courtesy she mechanically made.

Melville, who himself felt a little guilty, hastened to her rescue, and the Baron, as he rolled a low chair for the newcomer, thought to himself, 'What a pity Otho is not here; it is always better to have those situations gone through, and over. The poor child!—so happy as she has been! It will be a pity if Circe come. But Circe always comes. How can Melville pretend that Circe is anything new, or has only sprung into existence because women do not go to church! Madame Napraxine is precisely the same kind of *charmeresse* that Propertius used to write odes to on his tablets; the type was more consistent then, because in our days costume is incongruous, and life is more complicated, and people are more tired, but it remains integrally the same.'

Nadine Napraxine meanwhile was saying:

'Your people were unwilling to let me in because it was not your day: but I insisted. When one desires a thing very much one always insists till one gets it. I find Paris talking of nothing but the Countess Othmar; I was eager to claim from her the privilege of an old friend.'

It was said with sweetness, apparent frankness, and all her own inimitable grace. She lightly touched, with the softest, slightest kiss, the cheeks of Yseulte, which grew warm and then cold. Not appearing to notice her embarrassment, Nadine Napraxine continued to string her pretty, careless, courteous phrases together with that tact which is the most useful and the most

graceful of all the talents. Yseulte had all a girl's embarrassment before her, and that dignity which was an instinct in her became, by contrast, almost stiffness.

'Someone has told her of me,' thought Nadine, with amusement and irritation combined. It at once offended her and pleased her that she should be a source of pain to this girl—to how many women had she been so, and without mercy! Well, why would they not learn to keep to themselves the wandering thoughts of their lovers and their lords? 'This child is beautiful,' she said to herself with candour; 'how can she fail with him. No doubt she loves him herself; men are not thankful. *Tenez la dragée haute* is the only motto for their subjection.'

She studied Yseulte with attention and interest, and without malice. She frankly admired this beauty so different to her own; this union of high-bred stateliness and childish naïveté which seemed to her just such a manner as some young châtelaine of some old Breton or Norman tower would have had in the days of the Reine Isabeau; she did full justice to it. The irritation she had felt when she had walked in the moonlight through the grass lands at Zaraïzoff, and thought of the château of Amyôt, had ceased the moment that she had entered the atmosphere of Paris. Othmar had believed that he had been cold as marble in that momentary meeting, but she had seen in it that her power over him was undiminished. She knew very well that soon or late he who had defied her would be once more as a reed in her hands. She was in no haste to try her force; she could rely on it in the calmness of certainty. She was very amiable to his wife; but she had a little touch of good-natured condescension in her amiability which made the pride of the girl shrink as under an affront which could not be resented; the very young always suffer under a kindness which tacitly reminds them, by its unspoken superiority, of their own inexperience and their own defects. The ironical smile, the slight suggestive phrases, the very indulgence, as to a child, of Nadine Napraxine were as so many thorns in the heart of Yseulte, who had none of that vanity which might have rendered her indifferent to them.

It was not so much an emotion, but a certain sentiment—half interest, half irritation—which brought her to the great house of which, in a moment of impulse, he had made this child mistress. 'They try to give it a false air of home,' she thought, with her merciless accuracy of penetration, 'but they do not succeed. It is always a barn—a barn gilded and painted like Versailles: but a barn. Perhaps they succeed better at Amyôt, and perhaps they do not. He always hated this huge house, and he was very right in his taste. It is made to entertain in, not to be happy in. If he were happy he would go far away to that castle by the blue Adrian Sea that I saw within a few leagues of Miramar.'

With that thought she had gone through the succession of

great rooms, grand and uninteresting as the rooms of the Escurial, until she had reached one of the drawing-rooms, with its painted panels of children romping in orchards and gardens, and there had found Yseulte sitting at her tapestry like some young dame of the time of Bayard or the Béarnais, a large hound at her feet, the two old men beside her.

'What colouring! She is like a pastel of Emile Lévy's!' she had thought, with an appreciation which was entirely sincere, as she kissed the girl's reluctant, roseleaf-like cheek: she really felt not the slightest ill-will towards her; on the contrary, she was moved to a compassion, none the less genuine that it was based on something very like disdain; the disdain of the wise for the simple, of the certainly victorious for the predestined vanquished, of the snake-charmer for those who let the snake kill them.

With her most charming grace, with that seduction which made it impossible for anyone in her presence to be her enemy, she renewed her acquaintance with the wife of Othmar, speaking pretty and gracious words of recognition and of admiration. Yseulte preserved a self-control admirable for one so young, to whom the necessities for such reserve were a new and painful lesson; but she was unable to keep the change of colour in her cheeks, and the expression in her candid eyes betrayed her to the quick perception of her guest.

'You have come to honour Paris, Princess?' said the Baron, to cover the embarrassment and the constraint of Yseulte.

'One always comes to Paris, Baron,' answered Nadine Napraxine, raising her eyeglass and gazing at the girl through it, with all the cruel, careless scrutiny of a woman of the world; her luminous eyes wanted no assistance of the sort, but it was a weapon—unkind as a dagger on occasion. 'One always comes to Paris. It is the toy-shop where we dolls of the world get mended when we are battered and bruised. We come for our hair, for our teeth, for our complexions; at any rate, for our gowns; and then when we arrive we remain. The Republic may push its iron roller, as Berlioz says it does, over the world; it rolls on wheels of lead; but it cannot prevent Paris from being always an empire, and always the *urbs* for us. I do not love Paris as passionately as most Russians do, yet even I admit that there is no other city where one finds so little monotony. Even in Paris, alas! as Marivaux said long ago, everybody has two eyes, one nose, and one mouth, and one sighs in vain for a little variety of outline.'

'If I remember,' said the Baron, 'Marivaux was more merciful to humanity than is Madame Napraxine; he admitted that even with such homely materials as two eyes, a nose, and a mouth, one could obtain infinite variety in expression; no two physiognomies are alike.'

'Perhaps in Marivaux's time men did not imitate the *chic anglais*!' said Nadine Napraxine. 'I see very little variety my-

self. Everybody is terribly like everyone else, except the Comtesse Othmar,' she added, with her charming smile, 'who is only like Hope nursing Love, or some other picture of a fairer day than ours.'

Yseulte, pained at herself for her want of self-command, coloured hotly under the compliment, in which her alarmed sensitiveness fancied there was hidden a sarcasm. She did not know of what picture Nadine Napraxine spoke, and she thought—'Does she mean that Hope was barren and foolish, that Love did not care?' She remembered the silver amorino and the empty gourd.

Directly appealed to, a moment later, she murmured something at random; she did not well know what; she grew first pale, then red; she seemed constrained and stupid, void of ideas, and stiff in manner. Friederich Othmar could have broken his cane about her shoulders in his vexation.

'Heavens and earth!' he thought, 'if you let yourself be magnetised at the first sight of an imagined rival, what will you do before the reality when you meet it? My poor little girl! It is not the women who adore a man, and are struck dumb because they see another woman whom he has once loved, who obtain any influence over him, or possess any charm whatever for him. Who is to tell you that? who is to open your eyes and harden your heart? who is to make you understand that you are as lovely as the morning, but that if you do not acquire self-control, wit, indifference, all the armoury of the world's weapons, she will pass over you as artillery sweeps over the daisy in the grass.'

But he could not say his impatient thoughts aloud; he could not even, by his own readiness of language and easy persiflage, contrive wholly to hide the uneasiness and restraint which the presence of her guest brought upon Yseulte, and which she herself was at once too young and too frank to dissemble. They amused the Princess Napraxine, and they gratified her infinitely. She had not the slightest pity for them; she had never suffered from any such awkwardness herself.

'You are cruel, Princess,' Melville ventured to murmur as he rose and bade her adieu.

'Have you only now discovered that?' said Nadine. 'And I do not know why you should discover it especially now, or why, even if it were truth, you should be in any way astonished. Thirty years of the confessional should have taught you that women are always cruel. Are you never cruel?' she said aloud, turning to Yseulte. 'Ah, then, your dog will disobey you and your horse run away with you, my dear Comtesse!'

'Is there no power in affection?' said Yseulte bravely, feeling her colour come and go, and conscious that she had made an absurd reply.

Madame Napraxine smiled with a little look of indulgent amusement, which made the girl thrill to the tips of her fingers.

'You are still in the age of illusions, my love. I dare say you even write poetry. Do you not write poetry? I am sure you must have a little velvet book and a silver pencil somewhere. It is so delightful to see anyone so young,' she added, with seriousness, to Friederich Othmar. 'The children are not young now, are never young. I do not think I ever was; I have no recollection of it. If I had daughters, I would send them to those Dames de Sainte Anne—away in Brittany, is it not?—if it be they who have made your nephew's wife what she is. I did not believe there was any place left, simple enough and sweet and solemn enough to make a girlhood like a garden lily. Othmar has been very happy to have gathered the lily.'

There were both reality and admiration in many of her words, but the last phrase was not so sincere. Yseulte, overhearing, thought, with a pang, 'She knows that he is not happy!' Her heart swelled. She felt that this exquisite woman, so little her senior in actual years, so immeasurably her superior in knowledge, tact, and power, laughed at her even as she praised her. 'How could she know that I wrote poetry?' thought the child, conscious of many a poor little verse, the unseen, carefully-hidden, timid offspring of a heart too full, written with a pencil in the leafy recesses of the woods of Amyôt, in that instinctive longing for adequate expression which is born of a great love. The chance phrase gave Nadine Napraxine in her sight all the irresistible fascination of a magician. She felt as if those languid, luminous eyes could read all the secrets of her soul—secrets so innocent, all pregnant with the memory of Othmar—secrets pure, wholesome, and harmless as the violets that the mosses hid in the Valois woods of Amyôt.

'Well, what do you think of her?' asked Friederich Othmar when she had left the house. Yseulte hesitated.

'I can believe that she has a great charm,' she answered with some effort. 'She has a fascination that one feels whether one will or no——'

She paused and unconsciously sighed.

'She is the greatest *charmeresse* in Europe,' replied Friederich Othmar. 'No other words describe her. She is not a Cleopatra or a Mary Stuart. She would never have had an Actium or a Kirk's Field. She would never have so blundered. She has no passions; she would be a better woman if she had. She is entirely chaste only because she is absolutely indifferent. It creates her immense power over men. She remains ice while she casts them into hell.' He stopped abruptly, remembering to whom he spoke, and added, 'Her visit was a most rare honour to you, my dear; she seldom deigns to go in person anywhere; her servants leave her cards, and the fortunate great ladies who are the recipients of them may go and see her on her day, and take their chance of receiving a few words from her. She is one of

those exceptional women who have no intimate friends of their own sex, or hardly any; men——'

He paused, asked leave to light a cigarette, and walked with it awhile about the room. Yseulte did not take up his unfinished phrase by an interrogation.

'Have you no inquisitiveness?' thought Friederich Othmar. She was, indeed, full of restless and painful curiosity concerning the woman who had just left her presence, but she would not allow herself to utter a word of it. She thought it would be disloyalty to her husband.

Some fifteen minutes later Othmar himself entered.

'Madame Napraxine has just honoured us *in propriâ personâ*,' said the Baron, looking at him with intention.

'Indeed!' said Othmar. 'It was most amiable of her,' he added, after a moment's pause; but to the penetration or to the imagination of his uncle it seemed that he spoke with embarrassment and annoyance. Yseulte had resumed her work at her tapestry. The cruel sense that she was not wanted there, that she had been brought there only out of pity, as a kind hand gives a stray animal a home, weighed on her more and more. She did not see all that others saw in her; all the attraction of her youth, and her innocence and her beauty. She had too sincere a humility for any idea of her own charms to console her. She was wise enough to perceive that the world flattered her because she was a rich man's wife, but in her own eyes she remained the same that she had been under the grey shadows of Faïel.

'If I were only myself again to-morrow, they would never think of me,' she said to herself, with a wisdom born out of the poverty and obscurity in which her childish years had been spent. She was passionately grateful to Othmar, as well as devoted to him; but the suggestion that she was in no way necessary to his happiness, was even a burden and a constraint to him, had been harshly set before her by the words of Blanchette, and it was corroborated by a thousand trifles of look, and speech, and accident. His very entrance into her room had nothing of the warmth of a man who returns to what he loves; he came there so evidently because he felt that courtesy and custom required it of him.

The Baron understood what was passing in her thoughts as she bent her fair head over her tapestry-frame, the severity of her black velvet gown serving to enhance, by its contrast, the whiteness of her throat, the youthfulness of her features, the suppleness and vigour of her form. He longed to say to her, 'My child, do not fret because he is no longer your lover—is even, perhaps, that of some one else; it is always so in marriage, even in love. There is always one who cares long, and one who cares little. It will not matter to you in the end; you will learn to lead your own

life; you will have your children. I do not think you will have your lovers, as most of them do, but you will get reconciled to accepting life on a lower plane than your youthful imagination placed it on at first.'

He would have liked to say that, and much more, to her, but he did not venture. She made no confidence, no appeal for sympathy; and after all, for aught he knew, she might be entirely content with her husband's ardour, or his lack of it. She was but a child still, and had little knowledge of the passions of men.

Othmar did not say that he had met his wife's guest as she left his house.

She had given him her prettiest smile.

'The Countess Othmar is quite lovely; and what a perfect manner!' she had said. 'What does she say to all your pessimism, to all your *boutades*? Does she understand them? You must send her to hear a course of Caro. Her mind can hardly be metaphysical yet. She is at the age to eat bonbons and expect caresses.'

Then she had made him a little careless sign of farewell, and her black horses had borne her through the great gates of gilded bronze of the house which always seemed to him oppressive as a gaol. The words were harmless, playful, amiable; yet they had annoyed him. He understood that she ridiculed his marriage, and that she divined that it had but little place in his affections, and as little hold upon his thoughts.

'Poor child!' he had said involuntarily, as he mounted his staircase to enter the presence of Yseulte.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

When Nadine Napraxine came into her boudoir on New Year's day, she smiled a little to see it blocked with flowers. She had always discountenanced any other gifts than flowers. Whoever had presumed to offer her anything else would have run the risk of having his name struck off her list of acquaintances.

'All those *gros cadeaux* are so vulgar,' she was wont to say. 'A branch of lilac—a tea-rose—nothing else. No; you must not send the lilac in a *cloisonné* Limoges vase, or the roses in a *repoussé* silver bowl; I should send you your vase or your bowl back to you; you have no kind of right to suppose that I want vases or bowls; but just the branch, just the rose, you may send if you like.'

They trembled, and dared not disobey; the lilacs or the roses came by the scores, with the greatest names of Europe attached to them; and her courtiers managed ingeniously to spend many

thousands of francs by means of the rarest of the orchids, fulfilling her commands in the letter, though breaking them in the spirit.

She smiled now as she came into her favourite room this morning, when fog and frost together reigned without. All the orchid world was there to welcome her, brilliant and ethereal as the hues of sunrise.

'They love to be extravagant,' she thought, with a little contempt. 'If one limit them to flowers they manage to spend as much as if they bought jewels. It is very vulgar, all that sort of thing. If I cared for any one of them, I should like him to bring me a little bunch of corn-cockles—just by way of change.'

She glanced here and there at a name, but, for the most part, did not even trouble herself to look who was the sender of this or of that.

'*C'est toute la bande*!' she murmured, with an impatient amusement, knowing that every man in Paris, with rank sufficient to be able to dare to do so, had sent his floral tribute there.

She rang for her favourite servant Paul; when he appeared she said to him, 'Take all those cards off those baskets and bouquets; they look as if they were ticketed for a horticultural show.' So Paul, obedient, swept away the visiting cards with his swift and silent touch, and the senders of them were not even honoured by her caring to know their names; their gifts were all blended in one mass of blossom as indifferent to her as themselves.

Paul, as he retired with the cards crushed in his hand, thought to himself with grim amusement, 'If only those *beaux messieurs* would understand that Nadège Fedorowna cares no more for any one of them than she will care for those flowers when they are yellow and withered to-morrow.'

'If somebody would bring me the corn-cockles!' she herself thought, with a little laugh.

At that moment there came a timid tap on the door which separated her boudoir from the great salons. She recognised it with a little shiver, such as a nervous woman will give when she sees an unpleasant or uncouth animal; only she was not nervous herself; she was merely impressionable and irritated.

'Come in,' she said impatiently.

The door opened behind the satin hangings, and Platon Napraxine entered.

'How many times must I request you to pay me the common respect of sending to know if I be visible?' she said, with that hauteur which he dreaded, as a prisoner in the fortress of Peter and Paul dreads the sight of the knout.

'I beg your pardon,' he murmured humbly. 'It is not our day, but I thought you would allow me to take advantage of the French New Year to—to—to bring you a little gift. Do not be angry, Nadine——'

He spoke very submissively and with a timidity which made his high-coloured cheeks grow paler. He had for many a year abandoned all hope of being any nearer to the woman who was his wife than the marble of the steps which she descended to her carriage; yet he could not help having, every now and then, a foolish impulse to approach her in affection, a wistful fancy that perhaps—perhaps—at last——

He laid on her knee as he spoke a velvet case, with her crown and initials in gold upon it.

'My dear Platon, what nonsense!' she said, with some real annoyance, and she murmured to herself: 'In half an hour he will take something similar to half a dozen *cocottes*!'

But she could do no less than open the case, which was filled by a necklace, earrings, and a small crown for the hair in pink pearls.

Platon Napraxine watched her wistfully as she looked at them with a listless indifference. If he could only please her once! If he could only once see that beautiful contemptuous mouth smile kindly on him.

'There is not one of them worth her little finger,' he thought, meaning the companions and consolers of his life.

'I think you have no pink pearls; it is the only thing you have not,' he said; as humble still as a chidden dog. 'Will you not let me wish you *bonne fête*, Nadine? I——'

He took her hand and carried it to his lips. She drew it away, not angrily, but with a profound indifference.

'I cannot see why one day in the year is any more than another, that we should make speeches upon it,' she said, shutting up the jewel case. 'The pearls are quite charming. It is too good of you. Only, you know I do not in the least see why you should give me things; I really do not want them——'

It was the *'j'en ai tant'* of her five-year-old philosophy.

'I know you do not want them,' said her husband with a blank sense of foolish disappointment, foolish because his hope had been foolish. 'But still most women never have jewels enough. I do not mean that I ever thought you would care for them, but still it is the custom—and—one never likes the day to go by—if you would say a kind word——'

'My dear Platon,' she said wearily, yet with a certain amusement at his stupidity, 'why will you persist in that superstition that one day is any more than all the others?—and not even a Russian day either! You, who are such a Slavophil, should have ignored a French New Year's day as quite pagan and indecent. The pearls are very pretty; I will put them on to-night, if that will please you. Only—only—you know I am not very fond of that sort of presents. Are you sure you have not another similar case in your pocket that you are going to take this morning to that very handsome new house in the Avenue Villiers? All the houses are new there, but that is newest——'

Napraxine coloured dully with a dual sense of embarrassment and ridicule.

He was silent.

'Are you sure?' said his wife, with her head leaning back on her cushions and her demure smile gleaming beneath the lashes of her half-closed eyelids.

'Nadine!' stammered Napraxine, in mingled discomfiture and eagerness, which made him blunder more and more. 'What can one do when you—you—as God is above us, if you had not turned me adrift years ago as if I were a monster, I would never have looked at another woman. You do not believe it, but I would not. Even now, I would leave them all if you said a word—if—if——'

She rose and laid the case of pearls down on a table near her.

'My dear Prince,' she said in her iciest tones, though, in her own heart, she could very willingly have laughed aloud, 'I see you have indeed mistaken your road to the Avenue de Villiers. Do you think you can purchase my—kindness—as you do that of your mistresses? Pray let this be the last of such blunders. You have not been guilty of them for many years. Do not begin now. They offend me. You will only ruffle, very disagreeably and uselessly, the amiable understanding on which we have agreed to live.'

'When did I ever agree?'

His face was darkly flushed, his voice was husky and had a tremor in it, something savage and imperious began to wake in him and tell him that after all this delicate and disdainful woman was his;—but her languid lids opened wholly, and her calm, luminous eyes looked him full in the face with that look with which the keeper can daunt, by sheer power of will, the animal which could trample him into dust and tear him into atoms.

'Pray, do not let us re-open a discussion which has been closed for six years,' she said in her softest, coldest voice. 'I am quite sure you meant well; I never bear malice; I will wear your pearls to-night. We have a dinner, I think; for d'Aumale, is it not? *Bonne fête, mon ami.* Think what a troubled life you would have if I cared about that new house, and be grateful. Please send Paul here. He must take away some of this lilac. So much of it will give me *migraine.*'

Napraxine stifled as best he could some oath which he dared not utter aloud, and went slowly and sullenly out of her presence, sensible of an ignominious dismissal. His glance as he went dwelt with suspicion on the baskets and bouquets which made the room and the adjoining rooms gardens of orchids and odontoglossum, of gardenias and of tea-roses.

'Is there one among them,' he thought, 'for whom she cares?'

He was nothing to her; but he would be something to such an one if ever he could find his foe.

He was hurt, wounded, humiliated, infuriated, all in one; conscious of a defeat which made him grotesque in her sight, sensible of an act of unwisdom and of sentimentality which had only placed him lower than ever in the estimation of a woman whom he was furiously conscious that he still loved and still desired.

When the hangings of the door had closed behind him, his wife laughed with an amusement which her sense of courtesy had controlled before, and put a tea-rose in the bosom of her gown.

'How stupid, how intensely stupid, to come to me as he goes to his *cocottes*,' she thought, with that irritation and ennui which were the only emotions which he ever aroused in her. 'And to renew that sort of argument as if we were two greengrocers living at Montmartre! Decidedly, when the *bon Dieu* made poor Platon, he left out of his composition every vestige of tact; and really tact is the only quality that it is absolutely necessary for everybody to have to prevent them from irritating others. Who could have imagined that after six years he would begin again like that! —he has always a little access of tenderness at the end of the year; last time he gave me a dreadful Chinese idol as big as himself with green eyes; some dealer had told him it was very precious: he did not know, he never knows; I wonder if there were anybody so stupid in all the world; I am only astonished that he did not send for Sachs and Mitz as an agreeable surprise for me!'

'Yes, Paul,' she said aloud, 'take away most of those flowers, they make my head ache; and give that case to Jeanne to put up in the jewel-safe. Tell Fedor that I shall want the horses in an hour.'

'How very stupid some women must be,' she reflected often, 'to let themselves be dictated to, and denied, and bullied, and worried by their husbands. Nothing is so easy to manage as a man, if you only begin in the right way with him. All depends on how you begin; it is just like a horse; if you do not make him feel that you are his superior at once, he will take advantage of you for ever. I remember my mother saying to me before my marriage: "Ménage ton mari, sois bien douce." Now, if I had listened to her, I should have had Platon on my shoulders all my life; I dare say, even, he would have expected me to please him, and to listen to him, and to accept all his absurdities. But I froze him from the first; he has always been intensely afraid of me. Of two people there is always one who is afraid, and I preferred that it should be he. It just shows what mind can do over matter.'

She looked listlessly at a pile of telegrams which her servant had brought in with him and laid on the little tablenear her.

'They will all say the same thing,' she thought indifferently, as she opened two or three which contained the usual greetings of the New Year from her innumerable relatives and friends in other

countries and at other courts; no Russian, of course, amongst them.

'If people must have it that a year begins, which is utterly absurd, why did they not take pretty pink and white April instead of this ugly, shivering, frost-bitten January?' she said to her dog Dauphin, as she glanced through the tedious compliments of the telegrams. At last, amidst them, there was one which made her change colour as she read it. It was from Lady Brancepeth, away on her estates in the North of England. It was only a line; it said:

'My brother has been killed on the ice in the Gulf of S. Lawrence.'

There were no details, only the bare fact, as it had been brought with the same crushing curtness by the electric cable from the western to the eastern shores of the Atlantic.

Nadine Napraxine read it three times without at the first realising or believing it. The news gave her a shock; not a great one, but still a kind of chilly pain and vague terror. A mist swam for a moment before her eyes; a sorrow, which was quite sincere, moved her as the sense of what she read gradually grew more and more distinct. A sudden remembrance smote her of Geraldine, as she had seen him first some three years earlier, standing on the beach at Biarritz, clad in his blue sea-clothes, with the sun shining full on his fair frank features and in his clear, happy, candid eyes. He had looked at her; his sister had beckoned to him, and had said carelessly: 'Ralph, is it possible that you do not know Madame Napraxine?' and he had come up to them over the rough red rocks, the sun and the wind playing in his bright hair. And then, life had never again been quite the same to him, and now it was over for ever. He was dead, just thirty years old!

'Pauvre garçon!' she said, with genuine regret, as she had said the same words when they had told her that the young Louis Napoléon had been killed at Isandula. It was not the regret for which the dead man, thinking of her as the frozen night had closed in on him and over the wastes of ice-bound waters, perchance had hoped. 'Pauvre garçon!' she murmured where she sat, amidst the profusion of the flowers. For a moment she felt cold in her room, which was as warm as a summer day, and through whose double windows of opalescent glass no breath of the outer air could penetrate.

'I suppose they will say I did this too!' she thought with impatience, her memory reverting to the death of young Seliedoff even whilst she said again very softly to herself, 'Pauvre garçon!'

She was sincerely sorry; she felt nothing of that more passionate and personal pain which once Geraldine might not unnaturally have hoped that his death would excite in her, but a sincere regret mingled with a kind of annoyance that men who had loved her would always go and run some tragic risks, so that they perished miserably:—and then the world blamed her.

'I, who detest tragedies!' she said to the little dog. 'When the majority of men, too, always live too long, live to have gout, and use spectacles, and grow tiresome!'

'Pauvre garçon, pauvre garçon!' she murmured once more, in the only threnody which occurred to her: how could he go and get drowned in the S. Lawrence, where the ice was surely as thick as in the Neva? She had always liked to play at being Providence to her world, a very capricious and unkind Providence indeed, but still one which decided their destinies without any reference to their desires as Providence is always permitted to do. She did not like these rude gusts of uncalled-for accident which blew out the lives which she held in her hand as if they were so many tapers!

'Pauvre garçon!'

He had grown very wearisome, he had been even disposed to become exacting, he had wearied her, and she had not known very well how to get rid of him; but still it was a pity. He had had a great position, he was an only son, his own people were very fond of him, he was better than most of the men of his age and rank; she had for once the sensation that one feels when one has broken a rare piece of china—the sensation of having done a silly thing, an irreparable thing.

'I never told him to go to Canada!' she said to herself. No: she had only told him that he wearied her. So he had wearied her; he had never been too amusing at the best of times. It was not her fault that he had become tiresome; they all became so; they had no originality. Still it was a pity; she saw his fair frank face, with its eyes so blue and so wistful, looking at her as he had stood to hear his sentence that last day we saw La Jacquemerille.

'I do not think I said anything unkind to him that day,' she reflected; and then the little smile that was so often on her lips came on them a moment as she thought: 'To be sure, I told him to marry somebody—anybody.'

Well, he was dead, and before he was thirty; with all his courage and gallantry and wealth, and the many people who loved him at home all powerless to save him from the black chasm of the yawning ice; and she was not so very sorry after all; she honestly wished she could feel more sorrow. She had never known real sorrow but once, when her father had been found dead in his writing-room in the Embassy at Vienna.

'Platon will be more sorry,' she thought, 'he always likes his worst enemies so much!'

Then she rang again for Paul, and told him to take the telegram to the Prince if he was still in the house.

Napraxine, in five minutes' time, not venturing to return in person, wrote to her on the back of the printed message:

'I am grieved indeed. Would you desire to postpone the dinner of to-night?'

She wrote back to him:

'That would be too infinitely ridiculous; though it is certainly a great pity, he was no relation of ours, only a *bonne connaissance*!'

'A *bonne connaissance*!' exclaimed Napraxine when he read the pencilled words. That was all the requiem given to the drowned man, whose battered and disfigured body was then on its way homeward, on the deck of a vessel which was ploughing a stormy way through dusky mountainous Atlantic waves!

She sat still a little while, looking through the remaining telegrams and casting them aside; all the rest were the mere congratulations of the season.

'I wonder when people will invent anything new!' she thought as she threw the last aside. 'To think that the Romans five-and-twenty centuries ago were also running about and visiting and sending cakes and taking flowers, because what they called a new year had come! I suppose the world will never liberate itself from the *camisole de force* of idiotic customs.'

She wrote a telegram of sympathy to the sister of Geraldine as she had written a letter of condolence to the mother of Seliedoff; then she had herself wrapped in sealskin from head to foot and prepared for her drive in the Bois.

'When I am gone, open the windows, Paul,' she said to the servant, who was so astonished that he ventured to ask if he heard aright, knowing that his lady loved warm air as a palm does.

'Open the windows and leave them open,' she repeated. She looked at all the hot-house blossoms and thought, with that cruelty which was latent in her side by side with her higher qualities, 'They will all be withered in an hour. Paul will tell all the valets, they will tell all their masters——'

The fancy diverted her. She liked flowers, but she liked a little cruelty like this much better. It would be wholesome for all those men to know how she valued their New Year's gifts.

'Women nowadays make them so vain,' she said to herself. 'If it were not for me, they would never get a lesson at all.'

To some the lesson had been severe, severe as the severity of death; but that fact scarcely affected her conscience.

She did not stop her carriage to speak to any of her acquaintances, for she supposed that the news of Geraldine's death would by this time be known in Paris, where he had so many friends, and knew that everyone would take pleasure in saying to her—'Mais comment donc? Est-ce bien vrai?——' It would be so tiresome!

'I cannot help it if they kill themselves!' she said to herself as her horses sped along the frosty roads. 'Society will blame me now, but I imagine they would have blamed me much more if

I had gone away into his north-country mists with poor Geraldine as he would have liked me to do; he was so sensational, poor fellow, and so romantic under his English awkwardness. Englishmen are like that; they can seldom say anything they mean properly, but they are very romantic under it all; they are always ready to compromise themselves, despite their decorum, and they have just the dogged fidelity of their own bulldogs.'

He had been better than most of them certainly.

She felt a certain pain as she went through the chill sharp air and heavy mists, and remembered how many times she had seen Geraldine come riding through the trees, and how boyishly his face had flushed whenever he had seen her first! Poor foolish fellow! to leave all his possessions and interests and duties, and to go out to Ottawa, where he had no earthly business to be, as if going to Ottawa were likely to deliver him of her memory! That was so truly an Englishman's idea, to change latitude and longitude and think you left behind you any inconvenient passion you might be haunted with by merely changing your climate and your food! 'Poor Ralph! Poor Ralph! I think there was nothing on earth tragic, ridiculous, or abominable that he would not have done if I had ordered him to do it—except that he would never have killed Platon. I do not think even I could have made him kill Platon. That is the sort of scruple an Englishman always has, alone of all men in the world.'

'I suppose she knows it, but she does not care,' said many persons, looking after her as their wont was, as she flashed past them, nothing scarcely seen of her except her luminous eyes looking out from the brown lustre of the sealskins, whilst she made an almost imperceptible gesture of her head to the innumerable salutations that marked her course.

'When we get rid of the *camisole de force*,' she said to herself, 'we shall get rid of bowing to each other; it is insane, when everyone meets everyone else morning, noon, and night, to be obliged to jerk one's head fifty times every quarter of an hour when one is out of doors!'

She scarcely moved hers, indeed, but still it was a trouble; it was to avoid the trouble that she sometimes took those long solitary drives into the open country, of which the motive constantly perplexed her world. To any other woman they would have attributed assignations, but no one could ever do that to the Princess Napraxine: her absolute indifference was too notorious a fact, and the dullest who knew aught of her felt that if ever she awoke to any preference she would never stoop to mask it. She cared nothing for the opinion of any living being. She had no lover, only because she had no love.

Under her nonchalance and her occasional sentiments of sympathy with revolutionists, she was of an inexorably proud temperament; she would have liked to be an empress — an

empress such as was seen in earlier times, whose mere breath spoke the *fiat* of life and death. As it was, she could only vex the souls of men and kill orchids.

When she reached home, after driving until dusk, she passed through her boudoir to see if Paul had obeyed her. He had obeyed her implicitly: the windows were still wide open and the bitter biting air was streaming into the room, driving out before it all the heat from the calorifère; all the poor flowers were withered, as if a scorch from fire had passed over them, and the beautiful butterfly petals were mere shrivelled, shapeless leaves. It had been a pity, she thought, to have obeyed her so exactly; yet she knew very well that if he had not done so, Paul, despite his twenty-five years of service to the house of Napraxine, would have found himself outside her doors for evermore that night.

'Shut them now,' she said to him, as he waited for her commands, 'and take away all those baskets and bouquets.'

Paul knew her too well to dare to remark what he had thought all the afternoon, that it had been a sad waste of some fifty thousand francs' worth of blossoms. He closed the windows in silence. She passed on towards her dressing-chambers through the little library which divided the boudoir from them, the gayest and most coquettish of little libraries in appearance, with ivory bookcases ornamented by painted medallions of birds, a few white marble busts, and hangings of modern Gobelin tapestry; but a library by no means destitute of serious and philosophic works of some Latin authors, and of transactions of recent scientific research.

In the library, Paul, hesitating, ventured to approach her with a bouquet which was not harmed by the twilight frost.

'This was left a few moments ago,' he explained as he tendered it in some trepidation, uncertain whether he had done wrong to exclude it from the general massacre. She took it indifferently: it was very simple;—a bouquet of narcissus with a rim of white violets, nothing else. The name on the card with it was Othmar's. She smiled and took it with her into her dressing-room. It was the bunch of 'corn-cockles' for which she had wished.

'I did not do wrong,' thought Paul, with a sigh of relief. Then he smiled too as he recalled the winter in which the sender had been many times alone with his mistress in that little room where the orchids had now withered in their gilded baskets. 'It was he if it were ever anyone,' he thought; 'but I do not believe it has ever been anyone—yet.'

His knowledge of the world made him make the restriction, as he called one of his subordinates to sweep away all that rubbish, pointing to the poor murdered flowers, whose costly *corbeilles* would be one of his many perquisites.

She, meanwhile, was undressed, clothed in a loose gown of

embroidered china silk, took a cup of tea, and slept peacefully in the perfumed warmth. She liked to come out of the frosty and foggy air, and lie still with the pleasant drowsiness caused by the contrast of the sharp evening wind and the atmosphere heated to 40° Réaumur. Physicians told her that so sudden a change was not wise or safe, but she laughed at them. 'What is pleasant is always wholesome,' she said, constructing new rules of hygiene, as she often did new rules of etiquette. She liked the warmth, the sense of repose, of languor, of voluptuousness, as a cat loves it, stretched on velvet, in still hot air. She slept now with perfect composure, dreamlessly, from the semi-stupor that driving against cold winds brings with it afterwards. Then, all at once, she dreamt of a lake half frozen, of dark tempestuous skies, of an open grave in the black water under the jagged drifting ice; and she awoke with a little unconscious cry to open her eyes on the mellow light, the satin hangings, the Saxe mirrors, the snowy bear-skins of her dressing-room, the little tray of silver and china, the bouquet of narcissus and violets near her.

'What a wretched dream! I, who never dream,' she said impatiently, as she stretched her limbs out on the white furs of her couch. Then she remembered Geraldine.

'Will he haunt me every time I go to sleep?' she thought, with a little shiver. It seemed to her altogether unreasonable and undeserved. She had never told him to go on the Gulf of St. Lawrence in the dangerous season before the ice was solid.

In an hour's time she took the bouquet of narcissus in her hand, and descended to her drawing-rooms. She wore the pink pearls that night, the little crown holding up her hair, raised like that of the portraits of Madame Tallien; she never wore her hair twice together in the same fashion. 'If you always wear your hair the same way, you have no imagination, and you are always suspected of a peruke,' she was wont to say.

Platon Napraxine seeing his despised gift thus honoured, was almost contented. In the *régime* of starvation, on which he had been kept so long, the smallest crumbs of condescension were eagerly seized by him.

She herself was in a gentle and gracious mood; she was not quite so merciless in speech as usual, but she was quite as charming. The Duc d'Aumale sat on her right hand, the English Ambassador on her left. Her airy laughter rang ever and again like silver bells; and Napraxine, even in the midst of the surprised gratitude with which he saw his pink pearls honoured by being worn, thought with a sense of depression and wonder: 'If I were to die to-morrow, would she care a whit more than she cares now for Ralph?'

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE telegram had merely said that Geraldine had been killed on the ice in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. There had been no details; but later on all the world learned that death had come to him in the freshness of his manhood by one of those trite accidents so common in North American waters in the beginning of winter, when the ice is still loose and detached, and is borne to and fro by the sullen waves which seem unwilling to endure its chains. He had been standing on an ice floe, off the Prince Edward Island, with Canadian hunters, seeking seals, when that portion of it which sustained them had suddenly broken away before they were aware of their danger, and, drifting with frightful rapidity, had borne them out to sea at the close of the short, bitter winter's day. Many on the shore were witnesses of the certain death to which they were carried, but no help was possible before the darkness of night came down—the night which froze all human life left without shelter in it.

Where the floe went none knew; when the dawn broke there was no trace of its passage to be made out amidst the many masses of ice rocking, meeting, parting, crashing one upon another as the frost strove to bind beneath its iron hold the free will and the wild anger of the sea. Whether those who had been upon it had been drowned, or frozen to death, or borne out to mid-Atlantic, none could know; but on the third day the body of Geraldine and of two of the Canadian fishermen had been washed ashore off the New Brunswick coast: his features had been recognised by his own crew, and the tidings of his cruel fate had been sent to his mother and his sisters. He had been the only son of a high and honourable house. There was the grief which sorrowed without hope in the old north country halls where a widowed mother wept for him, and a loyal and loving tenantry followed his body to its grave by the fair Yore waters.

One Tuesday evening, some two weeks later, when Nadine Napraxine returned home from the opera to change her gown for a ball at Prince Orloff's, there lay on her dressing-room table, amongst others, a letter of which the superscription was very familiar to her, and which moved her with a certain sense which was as nearly fear as it was possible for her temperament to know.

She herself had written to Geraldine's people, but no one of them had answered her until now that Evelyn Brancepeth did so. She broke the envelope and read the letter, standing in the costume of Venetian red embroidered with silver flowers, in which, at the opera that night, she had held all the eyes of the house upon her as she sat, careless, indifferent, half-hidden behind her great red

doubt, instincts had been all alike, just as manners were all alike now. People were all dull, and because she found them so they considered her heartless. Poor Geraldine had been dull; dull in comprehension, in intention, in discernment; and just because she had found him so his sister wrote to her as if she were a murderess.

'Poor woman!' she reflected. 'She is always so disposed to see everything so terribly *en noir*. That is so English, too. They always have the fog in their eyes. I am not in the least like Lady Macbeth. I neither murder men, nor have my sleep murdered by them. It is natural that she should feel keenly the loss of her only brother, but it is absurd that she should lay the blame upon my shoulders, when she knows that if he had not wished to shoot seals—which is a barbarous pastime—he would have been alive now. As if a man could be wasting with despair, and yet care about seals! To be sure, it is very English. If an Englishman be hopelessly in love with anyone, he generally goes a long way off and tries to kill a tiger or a moose. I do not see the connection of ideas between the sigh of passion and the steel of a gun barrel, but there must be some link of affinity for them, because they all do it. I prefer men like Othmar, who kill other men.'

Although she was all alone as these thoughts drifted through her mind while the letter of Lady Brancepeth lay amongst the litter of notes, cards, and invitations on her table, a momentary warmth came on her face as the name of Othmar recurred to her, and a certain bitterness of contempt came into her recollection as she remembered his marriage. If he had had patience, if he only had had patience, perhaps—perhaps—perhaps——

She would not have gone away with him, because in her world they did not do those things, and she would have always been too keenly afraid of an after-time of regret and weariness, but she might have accepted the gift of his life, and given him something of her own.

In his haste and wrath he had set up a barrier between them, but how frail it was! Only the timid, wistful youth of a girl! The imperial scorn of the Cleopatras of the earth rose in her before her meek, childlike rival.

What a coward he had been to shelter himself behind the frail rampart of a young girl's affection; affection which he did not appreciate, did not reciprocate, did not value!

A woman with a tithe part of the discernment and the experience which she possessed could cast the horoscope of Yseulte without any recourse to the stars for knowledge of the future. All that fresh and tender love would count for nothing, would avail nothing, would awaken no response. She would bear his children, and live in his houses, and be the object of all his careful outward observance, and that would be all. He would grow

unspeakably weary of seeing her, of hearing her, of remembering her tie to him, and he would conceal his weariness ill or well, and be every day more and more galled by the necessity for concealment.

When Nadine Napraxine, after the ball, went to her own rooms that night, she had herself undressed by her women and wrapped in a loose bedroom gown, made of her favourite white satin, and lined with eider-down. She dismissed her women, and lay before the warmth of her dressing-room fire in that dreamy state between waking and sleeping which is the very perfection of repose. The softly-lighted chambers opened one out of another in a vista of rich subdued colour, ending in the bath-room, where a lamp hung above a beautiful reproduction of the Venus of Naples. The rooms were so many temples to her own perfections, she was the Grace, the Muse, and the Venus herself of this perfect sanctuary, which no footfall of man had ever dared invade. As she reclined before the fire that night and glanced through her half-closed lids down the succession of chambers, which in the clear but delicate light had the glow of jewels, she thought how dull and empty they would have seemed to most women of her years without a lover's step coming silently and swiftly through the fragrant silence.

'Decidedly,' she mused, 'the *voix de la nature* says nothing at all to me. Is it because I have no heart, as they say? I do not think the heart has much to do with that kind of thing. I suppose I am cold, as they all cry out against me. Of all of them, there is no one I should care to see coming through those shadows; he would disturb me. The passions are coarse things. It is disgusting that there should not be two ways of love, one for Dona Sol and one for Manon Lescaut—for one's self and one's maid. But there are not. *On se rend, ou on ne se rend pas*; but when the submission is made Nature makes no difference between Cleopatra and a camp-follower.'

She sighed a little, inconsistently. She disdained alike the solicitations of the senses and the pleasures of the affections, and yet she was conscious of a certain coldness and emptiness in her life; she was not prepared to confess that what she needed was love, but a vague impression of solitude came upon her. She remembered the lips of Othmar pressed upon her wrist, how they had burned, how they had trembled!

Was it possible that the keenest joys of life lay, after all, in those follies which her temperament and her philosophies had classed with contempt amongst the excesses of wantons and the exaggerations of poets?

The purest maiden in her cloister could not have been colder than was Nadine Napraxine; to her the indulgence of the senses only meant an intolerable humiliation, an ignominious outrage: maternity itself had only been to her a long and hated and

revolting burden, a sign of unendurable degradation, which offended all her pride and all her delicacy. The satyr had always seemed to her a much juster emblem of such instincts than any winged amorino.

'D'un être inconnu le contact passager'

could not rouse any desire or any sentiment in her.

And yet there were occasionally moments, fleeting ones it is true, when in the sublimated egoism of her indolent, ironical, artificial life, she had a vague impression of some possible passion which yet might arouse her to acknowledge its force; a tempestuous fancy swept over her, as a storm-wind may sweep over a parterre of tulips and azaleas, for stronger emotions, hotter enmities, dearer attachments, keener strife, than those which the polished inanities of her own sphere could yield to her. The emotion lasted with her very little time, but whilst it was there the eyes of Othmar always looked in memory into hers.

She who at will forgot everything had never forgotten the sound of his voice as he had pleaded with her. It had ever since haunted her with a vague imperfect sense of something missed, something lost, something in her own life incomplete and unattainable. She had not a doubt but that in time they would have wearied each other—fatigue was the inevitable shadow of all love—yet she had a pathetic regretfulness as for life incomplete, undeveloped, unshared, whenever she remembered that hers and his might have been passed together.

It had been only a sentiment; it never had risen to the form of desire, or ached with the pain of passion; but it had been a sentiment, vague, almost poetic; a wild flower of feeling which seemed of strange growth in the hot-house culture of her intelligence, and the rarified chill air of her many philosophies.

She had sometimes said to herself, 'I could have loved him.' In self-communion the conditional mood is never parted by more than a hair's-breadth from the present. There were moments in the ironical, indolent, artificial life which usurped her time and thoughts in which she almost regretted that decision which had banished Othmar from her side and given him to another. The regret was as nearly a movement of the heart as she was capable of; but it was much besides that; it was the inquisitiveness of a *désœuvrée* incredulous that life could hold any great emotions for her; it was the impulse of a contemptuous courage to break through social laws which it despised; it was the desire of a woman lonely amidst her triumphs to find that key to the enjoyment of existence which, in some way or another, had slipped through her hands, and had never been discovered in its hiding-place.

'If I had been quite sure that he would have contented me!' she thought more than once.

If she had been quite sure, she would have surrendered everything, paused at nothing; it was neither daring nor generosity which were wanting in her; but she had not been sure, since she was never sure of herself.

CHAPTER XL.

A FORTNIGHT afterwards, the Prince and Princess Napraxine issued cards for a dinner, to meet the Emperor of all the Russias. The invitation came to the Hôtel Othmar at noon, as Yseulte sat at breakfast; she coloured a little as she saw it, and passed it across the table to her husband with a dozen other invitations. He glanced at them, put them aside, and spoke of something else. She hesitated a few minutes, then said timidly:

'Am I to accept it?'

'Accept which of them?'

'The Princess Napraxine's.'

He looked up with some displeasure at her tone; he answered quickly:

'Assuredly. Why not? You cannot leave it open as you do for a ball or a reception.'

She did not venture to say why. She coloured more and more, and remained silent.

'You have no plea for refusing invitations since you are not ill and are seen everywhere,' he said coldly. 'Besides, I thought you were acquiring the tastes of the world.'

She did not speak. She could not say to him: 'I cannot bear to be the guest of Madame Napraxine, because they tell me you have loved her as you never have loved me.'

Othmar glanced at her, and imagined what was in her thoughts. 'Perhaps that meddlesome Melville has talked to her,' he thought, with the ready suspicion of a man of the world of an ecclesiastic. He said, a little impatiently:

'My dear child, do not conceive animosities against people, or you will spoil your own sweetness of temper and make yourself disliked by your own sex. And do not fret yourself with imaginary antagonisms, which are altogether unworthy of you. When we are living in the world, we must abide by its rules of courtesy. I am wholly at a loss to imagine why you should be unwilling to accept this invitation; but as you are seen everywhere in this your first Paris winter, you cannot without rudeness refuse it. This is the only good that I have ever seen come out of society, that it compels us to subordinate our own inclinations to certain definite laws of good breeding. Pray do not grow fretful; it was your beautiful serenity that I first admired, and loved.'

He hesitated a moment before the last word.

'I will remember,' she said gently; but without much effort she would have burst into tears.

He saw the effort, and it irritated him. He knew that he ought to have said to her, 'Follow your inclination and refuse, if you like.' But her wish to refuse it had annoyed him, and hurried him into a command to accept it from which he could not recede. And the charm of Nadine Napraxine was upon him, and had broken down all his wiser resolutions.

He looked across the table at Yseulte. She was as fair as the dawn, certainly; but she had no power over him; she did not beguile his time, or stimulate his wit, or stir his intellect; she did not, even after twelve months of possession, move his senses. She was a lovely child, most obedient, tender, and spiritual; but she was not the mistress of his thoughts. She never had been, she never would be so.

'How stupid men are!' thought Nadine Napraxine that night. 'She is worth very much more than I am; she is both handsome and lovely; she is as harmless and guileless as a dove, and she adores him, a great deal too much; yet, perhaps one ought to say therefore, he cares nothing on earth for her; he will love me as long as his life lasts; he would do so even if I had the tremendous penalty-weight, as the racing men say, of being his wife. I really do not know why it is that the noblest sort of women do not excite love. I wonder why it is? I asked my father once; he said, "Because the devil dowers his own daughters." But that explains nothing; we all know there is no devil; there are women—and women. That is all.'

As those thoughts drifted dreamily through her mind she was conversing all the while about classic music with a potentate who was no mean dilettante in melody, and she was looking down her table at the young face of Yseulte with a vague sort of pity which she could scarcely have explained—such pity as in the gladiatorial arena some trained and irresistible *retiarius* might have felt at seeing some fair brave youth enter with the shield that was to be so useless and the sword that was so soon to fail; a pity which might be quite sincere, though it might never go so far as mercy. The faint jealousy which she had felt when, walking amongst the moonlit fields of Zaraïzoff, she had thought of Amyôt, had faded altogether the moment that she had met Othmar again. She knew, as women always know such things, that her power over him was unaltered and unalterable by any will of his own.

'When I choose,' she thought, 'he will leave her and she will break her heart. She will know nothing about such reprisal as a Parisienne should take; she will never be a Parisienne; she will always be a patrician of the *vieille souche*, which is quite another thing; she will always be an innocent woman, with a soul like a lily. She is afraid of me, and she dislikes me; she tries to hide

it all she can, but she does not know how. Platon admires her; that is what he ought to have married; I dare say she would never have found him ugly or clumsy; he would have been her husband—that would have been enough to make him sacred; there are women like that. She adores Othmar, but she knows nothing about him; he is a little like Hamlet, and she is as much puzzled as Ophelia. Of course she would have worshipped any man who had prevented her being buried in a convent; she is as full of life as a lime-tree in flower. She is longing to look at me always, but she does not dare. She is quite beautiful, quite, but all that is no use to her. He knows it, but he does not care for it. He will keep her in his house and have children by her, but he will care no more for her than for Mercié's Andromache, that stands in his vestibule. Whether you are Venus or a Hottentot matters so little if a man do not love you; if you do not know how to make him love you. They always say a modest woman never does know how; but I do not think I am especially immodest, yet I know——'

The disjointed thoughts drifted through her mind without interfering with the current of her conversation. Metaphysicians may dispute the existence of two simultaneous trains of thought, but women know their possibility.

Her enigmatical victorious smile came on her lips as that consciousness soothed and stimulated her.

She had too much honour to make any deliberate project to seduce him from his allegiance. Her coquetries might be less merciful than many more guilty, but they had never ceased to be innocent in the world's conception of the term. The coldness with which Othmar had reproached her was still one of the most definite of her qualities. It was the amulet of her magic, the secret of her power. She was as yet a perfectly passionless woman, and as such ruled the passions of men.

'So, Othmar, like everyone else, you find that marriage leads to the world, not to the hidden doves' nest of the poets?' said Nadine Napraxine after dinner, when her rooms had filled an hour before midnight, and her Imperial guest had gone and left her free.

'I am afraid it is impossible to avoid following the mould of the society we live in,' replied Othmar. 'The hope of being original is one of the many illusions which we leave behind us with time.'

'I confess that I am a little disappointed in you,' she continued, with the smile of malice which he knew so well. 'I should have thought you would have had courage to live your own life, to avoid beaten paths, and to keep your lovely arum lily from the Breton woods out of our forcing-house. Allow me to say it in all simplicity and sincerity, she *is* most lovely. All Paris envies you.'

Othmar's face flushed as he bowed in acknowledgment. He

believe me that there is nothing of the kind. We all make our own fates, or our temperaments make them for us. Destiny does not stalk about us unseen, but irresistible, as I know you think it does. I believe there is nothing which befalls us, from a catarrh to a catastrophe, which, if we choose to be honest with ourselves, we may not trace to our own imprudence.'

'You cannot judge; you have never——'

'Never had a cold? Oh, indeed I have. If you were to listen to de Thiviers, I am a person on whom the most southerly wind should never be allowed to blow, for fear of its blowing through me and annihilating me; as for catastrophe——'

She paused a moment; across even her profound indifference there passed the memories of some dead men.

'Catastrophes,' added Othmar; 'catastrophes have not been lacking in the pageant of your life, madame; but I believe they have only been the shipwrecks seen through the windows of rose-glass.'

She was silent. Then she said slowly and in a low voice:

'You mistake if you think that I did not feel pain for the death of Seliedoff.'

Othmar bent his head. She saw that he did not believe her. The sense of being misjudged banished her momentarily chastened mood.

'But I was at the same time very much annoyed,' she continued. 'Tragedy always annoys me. It sets the asses of the world braying. No one ever pleases me by irrational or exaggerated actions. I am sorry, of course, but I cannot forgive the uproar which all conduct of—of that sort causes me. It always irritates me like the conflagration in the cantata of the "Dernière Nuit de Sardanapale," where the *grosse caisse* always roars and rolls so loud that all the music is lost, and one does not feel to care in the very least who may die or who may live.'

Then she rose and gave him a little smile.

'I assure you the *grosse caisse* is a mistake in a cantata!' she said as she passed him and left him, the subtle, voluptuous odour of the gardenias of her bouquet floating by him like the dewy odours of a midsummer eve.

He thought bitterly that he could comprehend how such a man as Joubert loved the scent of tube-roses till his death, because a woman once had taken a cluster of them from his hand twenty years before in a garden alley of the Tuileries.

It irritated him extremely that she should so exactly have suspected and penetrated the motive which had led him to desire that the life of the world should distract and occupy the young companion of his life. It was a motive of which he was acutely ashamed, which he could not endure to confess to himself, much less could bear to feel was subject to the observation of her unsparing raillery. Of all wounds which she could have reopened,

none would have ached more keenly in him than his humiliating sense of how she, at the least, must know that the young girl who bore his name had no place in his heart; that she, at the least, must remember, as he remembered, those interviews with her at La Jacquemerille which had been so closely followed by his marriage. He might deceive all the world into the belief that he loved his wife—he could not so deceive her. His veins thrilled, his blood burned, as he recalled those two days in which his passion had been spoken to her in words whose utterance he himself could never forget. What had they sounded to her ear? Only, no doubt, like the *grosse caisse* which, symbolising death, agony, destruction, woe untellable, yet only seemed to her grotesquely forcible, jarring unpleasantly on the harmonious serenity of the symphony!

He forced himself not to follow her with his eyes as she moved away with that exquisite harmony of step and carriage which were due to the perfect proportions of her form, and he turned and sought out Yseulte herself.

She was in the music-room, listening absently to an andante of Beethoven's, surrounded by a little court of men no longer young, who cared nothing for Beethoven, but much for her youth and her unconscious charm of manner.

'Are you willing to come away?' he murmured to her when the andante was ended.

She rose with eagerness; to be in the Hôtel Napraxine was oppressive and painful to her.

He took her away unobserved, and drove homeward beside her in silence. He looked at her profile, fair and clear against the light thrown from without on the glass of the carriage window, and at the whiteness of her slender throat, with its collar of pearls, and hated himself because he could only think, with a shudder, 'All my life must I sit beside her, a living lie to her!'

'Yseulte,' he murmured suddenly; then paused: he felt a momentary impulse to tell her the truth, to say to her, 'I do not love you—God forgive me!—I love another woman; help me, my dear, and pity me; do not reproach me; I will do the best that I can by your life; love me always yourself if you can; I need it sorely. We may never be happy; but at least there will be no falsehood or secrecy between us. That will be much.'

The impulse was momentarily strong upon him; he took her hand in his and said once more with hesitation: 'Yseulte——'

Then he paused; long habit of reserve, a sensitive fear of wounding and of being wounded, the tenderness of pity for a blameless creature who adored him and who, if he spoke his thoughts aloud, would never lie in peace upon his heart again, all checked the words which had risen to his lips.

He sighed, kissed her hand, and murmured some vague caress-

ing phrase. The moment passed; the impulse of confidence and candour lost strength and courage. 'It would be cruel,' he thought. 'Since I have made my burden, let me at least have courage to bear it alone.'

It seemed to him unmanly and ungenerous to lay any share or shadow of it on this young life, which owed all its peace and light to ignorance of the truth. She was deluded, but she was happy: he let her be. He shrank from arousing her; he shrank from hurting her; she was like a child, doomed to starve on her awaking, but whilst she slept, dreaming, with a smile, that she was fed by bread from heaven.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE Paris season seemed to all her world to have gained new brilliancy with the advent of the Princess Napraxine. The opening of that most desired and exclusive of all houses was an event of supreme import in the hierarchy of society, and she herself had returned from her self-inflicted exile in the North more disposed than usual for its frivolities and graces, more willing than usual to deign to see and be seen, more general in her courtesies, more amiable and benignant in her condescensions. When she chose, she could fascinate women scarcely less completely than she did men, and she did so choose this year of her reappearance from Russia. She was less capricious, less inexorably exclusive, less merciless in her ironies; those who knew her nature best concluded that something had pleased her; no one knew what. She, who had no secrets from herself as sillier people have, confessed frankly to herself that what pleased her was what her fine penetration had discovered at a glance, the first moment that she had entered the Hôtel d'Othmar.

'All the virtues are there, no doubt,' she had said to herself, 'and all the qualities and all the charms, but Love—*où va-t-il se nicher?*'

Love, she saw, was absent.

She had a curious sentiment towards the young mistress of that gorgeous house. She admired her; she thought her type pure and lofty, her manners most high bred, if a little too constrained, her face lovely; she had a sort of pitying regard for her; the glance of the girl's eyes moved her to compassion as those of an antelope will do the hunter, who nevertheless plunges his knife into its velvet throat; but she was not more dissuaded by her pity than the hunter is by his to desist from her intentions.

The waning of the slight affection which he had ever been able to give his young wife, the growing constraint of her manner to him and before him, the visible chillness which had fallen on

their life together since that December night when she herself had arrived in Paris were all plain enough to her unerring perceptions, however slight might be the outward signs of that separation which was only not estrangement, because on the one side there was a devotion so timid, grateful, and constant that it could not be estranged.

Her world observed that she treated Yseulte with much more kindliness than it was common with her to show to women so young. Whenever she spoke of her, or to her, she always used some phrase which was gracious or flattering, with that most subtle and delicate flattery of which she had the secret as well as she had those of the most cruel ironies and insinuations; the extreme charm of her flatteries, as the intense sting of her cruelties, always lay in the fact that they contained a visible truth; they were not the mere offspring of invention.

Yseulte did not show to equal advantage when she received them; she was always embarrassed, even almost rude, so far as rudeness was possible to one nurtured in all the grand traditions of French patrician courtesy. In her own heart the child suffered excruciating mortification whenever the one woman she knew her husband had loved—did love—met her with sweet and praiseful words. She had all the exaggerated honesty of exceeding youth; she could not believe that sincerity permitted the sincere to smile on what they hated, and almost—almost—she hated this exquisite woman who was so gracious to her. It became an absolute dread upon her lest she should meet the one person who had this power to make her feel insignificant, ignorant, and awkward: a power never expressed, never even hinted at, yet lying beneath all those pretty phrases which the Princess Napraxine addressed to her or spoke before her. Her own innocent pleasure in these new pleasures of the world was marred by the constant apprehension of meeting her one enemy, who did not even give her the frank offence of an enemy, but always approached her with the smiling grace of a friendship the insincerity of which her own sincere instincts detected. The routine of their world brought them in almost perpetual contact, and Yseulte felt her presence before she saw her, and was conscious of a nervousness which she could not conquer, though she strove to conceal it. There was no one to whom she dared to speak of what she felt, and she was indeed ashamed of it. Youth dies a hundred deaths in silence in these unavowed antagonisms and apprehensions. If she had ventured to confess what she felt to Othmar, she would have ceased to be haunted by these vague terrors; but there was a look in his face whenever the name of Nadine Napraxine was spoken before him, which told her she herself must never speak it in blame or in fear. A chill and desolate consciousness had by degrees stolen upon her that they were right who said her husband loved this other woman as he never had and never would love herself. She

said nothing to anyone, not even in the confessional; but a coldness like frost seemed to have come over her glad, warm, and grateful life just opened like the primroses in spring.

The day after he had left that simple bouquet of narcissus and white violets, Othmar had called at the Hôtel Napraxine. It was not her day, but she was at home and received him; it was the twilight hour so favourable to dreams, to confidence, to familiarity; when he had left the house he was conscious he had done an unwise thing, perhaps even an unmanly thing; but he had been for the moment almost happy, which he had not been for a year.

They had not been even alone; but the sound of her voice, the languid glance of her eyes in the dim half-light, the music of her slight, low laugh, had all thrilled his veins with a thousand memories of passion and of hope. He had said to himself, 'I will never go back,' but he had gone back, and he knew that life would only count to him in future by the moments when he should return. In the evening which followed on his visit he was, quite unwittingly, colder and more preoccupied than Yseulte had ever seen him; he was even for once almost irritable. She looked at him wistfully. Friederich Othmar, who was present there, thought to himself in futile fury: 'That sorceress has bewitched him once more. In another twelvemonths' time, if he be not her accepted lover he will have shot himself. This poor fair child would cut her heart out of her breast to serve him; but she will grow less and less to him, less and less, every day. It is no fault of hers. He never cared for her, and she has no philtre of which she can make him drink. Innocent women do not brew them. Poor sweet fools! They can only pray!'

The old man had never cared for these women before; but now he did care. His heart which had been so cold all his life melted towards Yseulte.

Why could not Othmar be content with his *coin du feu*? When the Baron came into her apartment and saw the tall figure of the girl, with her fair head carried with a little droop like a flower's after rain, he was every day more and more angry to find her husband so seldom there. Yseulte seemed to him to have in herself all those beauties and qualities which should be sweetest in the eyes of a man. But she was left alone, very constantly alone.

To one who had loved her she would have been full of interest, of surprises for the imagination, and of nascent character for influence to work upon; but to Othmar she was only a child, tame, quiet, without power to arrest or to excite him.

In the presence of Nadine Napraxine every fibre of his being was thrilled and awake, every nerve of his mind and body was alternately soothed and strung; her discursive and ironical intelligence seemed to light up the universe of thought, and every syllable she spoke, every slight gesture, smile, and suggestive

glance, were fuller of meaning and more appealing at once to the intellect and the senses than hours of effort and provocation from other women. When he passed from her presence into that of Yseulte it was as though he passed from the marvellous intricacies of the passion music of *Tristan und Isolde* to the simple peace and prayer of a Gregorian chaunt sung by a child chorister. The latter was not without beauty of its own; beauty harmless and holy; but which had no power to move him.

Little by little his caresses grew fewer, his attentions grew rarer to his wife; he was always full of courteous observance and unremitting kindness to her as before; but the times were rare in which he sought her alone—the evenings few in which he entered her apartments.

His whole remembrance, desires, and adoration were with Nadine Napraxine. He imagined that he entirely concealed his weakness from the world and from Yseulte; but as the weeks passed on and the opportunities of society brought him continually into the presence of the one woman whom he loved, the magical influence of her dominion began completely to absorb and to subdue him afresh. He still abstained from any intimacy at her house; he still more rarely visited her or directly sought her, but all the indirect occasions to be in her presence which the routine of their world afforded he accepted and looked forward to with an eagerness which he imagined was wholly unsuspected by others. When she was entertained at his own hotel he was studiously distant in his courtesies, and though he did not betray it, he was embarrassed by the honest and cordial regard which her husband showed to him.

Friederich Othmar would very much have liked to speak his mind on the subject to his nephew, but he felt that he had no possible pretext to do so, for Othmar was perfect in his manner to his young wife and constant in his kindness and solicitude for her. The elder man felt that he could not with decency split straws about imaginary wrongs when he himself had been always so incredulous of the sorrows of the affections. So long as Othmar refused her nothing, inflicted no slight on her publicly, and never said a syllable to her that was unkind or uncourteous, it was impossible for anyone to call him to account for mere fanciful offences which, however real might be the suffering they caused, had no substantial ground or root.

'He would laugh at me,' thought the Baron, and the whole philosophy of his life made any possible ridicule on grounds of sentiment intolerable to him even in idea. He was, moreover, conscious that Othmar would do more than laugh, and united to his impatience of his nephew's errors and caprices was a reverence for him as the chief of the House, which was still stronger than any other feeling. So might a loyal prince of blood royal see in his nephew a man most blamable, full of faults and of inconsistency,

yet see in him also his sovereign, whose very errors or failures he was bound, for sake of their common race and of his sworn supremacy, to defend.

'Othmar can do no wrong in your sight,' said Nadine Napraxine once, with the smile that the Baron hated.

'Nor could the Roi Soleil in the sight of his family,' he responded, with a tone that was the reverse of amiable, 'yet there were lovely ladies on the terraces of Marley and Versailles who must have tried their patience and their faith sometimes.'

'Can faith and patience be said to exist unless they are tried?' said his tormentor. 'And I should think that the Treaty of Utrecht tried both much more than his preferences, which could not matter in the very least to them.'

Friederich Othmar was silent, twisting his white moustaches irritably. He would have liked to say many things to her, but he dared not; he did not know enough; and Othmar, implacably incensed, would have quarrelled with him then and for ever had he ventured to interfere.

He who had intelligence enough to appreciate the sprituality and unworldliness of Yseulte's nature, who had been first touched by her unlikeness to all the young girls of his world, by her serious and elevated character and her simple unostentatious piety, felt a sting of shame at his own motives when he realised how much he sought to make her like all other women, how much he trusted to frivolous temptations to console and to absorb her.

'In doubt do nothing,' he knew well was one of the golden legends of the world's wisdom. If she had sought advice or sympathy, her doubts and her fears might have been soothed in a measure. Her confessors would have given her the same counsel as that worldliest of men, Friederich Othmar. They would have entreated her not to fret her life out over mere sorrows of the emotions and the imagination; they would have hinted that she was exceptionally happy if she had no more to bear than an inconstancy of the mind and of the fancy; they would have bade her trust to her youth, to her own strength of affection, and to her place in his house and in his life, to give her ultimate supremacy in the thoughts and the heart of her husband. But even in the sanctity of the confessional she chose rather to commit the sin, for sin it was in her sight, of hiding all her inmost feelings and keeping silence on all her most rebellious impulses rather than speak of Othmar with any words which might imply suspicion, blame, or reproach to him. Her convent life had given her such little knowledge of human nature, her sensitive reserve of character left her so entirely without counsellors or friends, that she was altogether alone in the bewilderment of this world which had at first seemed to her at once a pageant and a paradise, but which, now that her soul was haunted by one poignant dread, only appeared to her filled with cruel problems, incomprehensible

temptations, strange confusions and humiliating motives. To her, only one friend was possible, her husband; to him alone would her timidity and her honour have permitted her to confide all her pathetic fears, all her innocent secrets; but Othmar never sought her confidence. Treating her with the gentleness of a man to a child, with the respect of a gentleman for what he wholly reverences, and is always willing to protect and please, he yet remained as distant from her in true confidence and sympathy as any stranger ushered into her drawing-rooms, whose face she had never seen before.

Naturally unselfish, Othmar had yet unconsciously dropped into the habit of one intense selfishness; he wrapped himself in his own thoughts as in a domino, and drew each day more and more closely about him that reserve which spared him all the trouble of reply, all the ennui of interrogation. The continual demands which his great position in the world made upon his time gave him continued excuse for being alike occupied and absorbed. Often the whole day passed, without her receiving more from him than a few brief gentle phrases of greeting or adieu.

But he had provided her with every possible means of enjoyment and of self-indulgence, and it did not occur to him that amidst all her luxury the heart of the child remained empty and hungered.

'He treats her as he would treat a mistress to whom he had grown utterly indifferent,' thought Melville, often observing him with anger. 'He surrounds her with every conceivable kind of luxury and distraction, and he leaves her alone amidst it. Does he think that a girl at her years wants nothing more than toilettes, horses, jewels, and *bibelots*? Does he suppose that at seventeen the heart is dead, and that the sentiments and the desires have said their last word? Does he believe that she will want nothing more of love than a chill embrace now and then, *pro formâ*? He leaves her at once so free and so starved, that were she any other woman in the world she would use her liberty in such wise that he would live to bitterly repent his neglect. But she is of the old time, the old school; she will keep silent and faithful; she will bear his children with the meekness and the resignation of the lambing sheep in spring-time; and she will rear them with courage, wisdom, and devotion. But she will not be happy, though probably the world will always envy her; and she will be less to him—less, less, less—with every year which passes. In the end they will be total strangers, and she will accept that strange sort of widowhood—the saddest of all—as patiently as she accepted maternity and its pains. The cloister is out of date, perhaps, as they say, but the fact remains that there are natures for which, whether in or out of the cloister, life means crucifixion.'

Melville strove to do what he could to restore peace to her; but it is difficult to administer any efficacious medicine when no

disease is admitted by the sufferer to exist. The extreme sensitiveness and the power of silent suffering in Yseulte baffled her well wishers, whilst it assisted those who did not wish her so well. When he, with his tact at suggestion, contrived to give her some hint that human love must always be accepted as a thing imperfect, that in every human life there must come disillusions, trials, and regrets, and that none of these need bring wretchedness with them if they be met with faith and patience, Yseulte listened to him with her usual courteous reverence, but felt bitterly that beneath his carefully chosen words, which were dropped with such elaborate assumption of hazard, as upon some general and impersonal subject, there were hidden both counsel to her and apprehension for her. She resented both with that hauteur which the blood of the de Valogne had given her; and he desisted from his efforts, afraid to do hurt where he wished to do good.

'After all,' he thought, 'one's fears for her may be wholly chimerical. Othmar is a man of honour, and Madame Napraxine is as chaste as snow—according to report. It is true, her chastity has been as perilous and as cruel as the immoralities of others. But I think, even if to Othmar she should be not so cold, and be even more fatal than usual, his young wife may have charm enough to keep him faithful, or at least to win him back to fidelity.'

But though he tried thus to reassure himself, he did not succeed. He had learned much of the wisdom of society in his forty years of priesthood; he had been the favourite ecclesiastic of the great world, and he had seen much of its delicate and capricious women, of its unstable and unhealthy passions, of its irksome and disregarded ties; and he saw in the position of Yseulte many possibilities of error and unhappiness, little likelihood of a future of peace. Never within his memory, with its innumerable records of human destinies, had he ever seen simplicity, innocence, and devotion victorious over finesse, experience, and egotism; never within his memory had either the confessional or the drawing-rooms afforded him any precedent by which he could hope that the love which gave its all unreservedly and adoringly with both hands would ever be conqueror over the seduction which provoked every desire and granted none, sacrificed nothing and expected all. Melville had always seen the egoist supreme in the conflict of life; his knowledge did not disturb his faith, it only made him the more convinced that there must be some future world in which all these wrongs would be set right; but it saddened him despite himself, and, despite his hope of ultimate compensation, he could not help whenever he could aiding the weak against the strong.

'If everything is done by the will of God, why do you try and alter it?' said Friederich Othmar to him once, with just sarcasm.

Melville was conscious that he was illogical, but he could not resist his own English love of fair play; it did not seem to him that as the world was made innocence and unselfishness ever obtained any chance of justice.

'It must be granted,' he thought mournfully once, also unable to resist his own clearsightedness and its conclusions, 'it must be granted that both innocence and unselfishness are too often inconceivably, irremediably, stupid, and throw their best cards on the table and follow will-o'-the-wisps, and break their limbs over every obstacle which a little skill and coolness would enable them to negotiate.'

The keen eyes of Aurore de Vannes saw what Othmar did not see; that since the arrival of Princess Napraxine her young cousin had no longer the single-hearted and buoyant happiness of the early months of her marriage, that her face was often melancholy, her gaze wistful, her manner constrained.

But her reflections were precisely contrary to those of Melville.

'She is fortunate beyond everything,' said the Duchesse to her intimate friends. 'He gives her all she can wish for, as if he were Haroun al Raschid, and he leaves her entirely to herself, because he is not in the least in love with her. Can anyone imagine a more enviable position?—to be seventeen years old and have all the Othmar millions at your back, and to enjoy such an absolute liberty that your husband never asks you even where you spend your days? Only she is such a baby still, so very full of all her convent fancies, so scrupulous, and proud, and old-fashioned, that I suppose she will never enjoy herself as she might do. She was ruined b these women at Faïel, and by the austerities and prejudices of the old Marquise. If she only knew it, her position might be the happiest in the world.'

'Will it not be as I said?' asked the Duc, her husband, triumphantly many a time. She always answered him irritably:

'If a woman prefer to be miserable she always can be; men will always furnish her with the materials. But in this case you may be quite sure it is merely a girl's romance and disappointment with marriage, which she expected, as they all do, to be a primrose path whilst it is only a common highway.'

'The highway can be varied by *étapes*,' murmured the Duc de Vannes.

He himself watched with unkind satisfaction the little cloud which had come in the serene heaven of Yseulte's fate. It might betoken but an April shower, or it might bring in its wake a tempest. When he had seen Nadine Napraxine arrive in Paris he had said to himself, 'Adieu les marguerites!' The daisies were simple treasures of the spring; they would have no charm beside the hothouse flower. As his little daughter had said, he had bet heavily on the chances of Yseulte's marriage, and he watched the unfolding of the leaves of fate with the impatience of the gambler

added to the unacknowledged malice of a personal pique. In the frequent opportunities which both society and relationship afforded him he dropped the gall of many a vague insinuation, worded with tact and finesse, into the troubled peace of her thoughts. He had too much skill and too much good taste to permit himself to speak either Othmar's or Nadine Napraxine's name directly, but he had not been so long schooled in the cruelties of the world without having learned the art of suggestion in its most merciless and its most subtle shapes. He never said so in any clear form of words, yet he contrived to convey to her his own conviction and the conviction of society that she counted for nothing in her husband's existence. All his delicately-hinted compassion, all his vaguely-worded indignation, the mere light jests with which he strove to amuse her, all contained that drop of acid which burned its way into the pure gold of her affections, and remained with her long after he had left her presence.

She always summoned fortitude enough to repress any sign of the harm he did to her; but the effect of it was for that reason the more baneful. Sorrows and doubts, which pass away when a woman can weep for them at her mother's knees, or in her sister's arms, grow strong and cruel in solitary meditation and the nurture of thoughts unconfessed.

One night at a great fête the Duc de Vannes approached her and said to her with a smile:

'How preoccupied you are, my cousin! I never should have thought that anyone so young would look so grave at a ball. Really, you make one fear that after all you were wrongly turned from your vocation, and would have been happiest in the cloister, much as the world would have lost.'

'The world would have lost nothing,' answered the girl, a little bitterly. 'The world and I have no affinity.'

'That is only an idea. In a few years you will habituate yourself to——' he paused and added with meaning, 'to many things which seem to you harsh and cold. Penelope nowadays, if she spin at all to console herself for abandonment, only weaves the web of *flirtages*——'

Yseulte coloured at the insinuation contained in the phrase. Her heart was too full for her to trust herself to answer. Did all these people know, as she knew, that her husband had never loved her?

'You are *trop taillée à l'antique*,' said de Vannes with a little impertinence. 'Do you think you are ever thanked for all this exclusive devotion which does not permit you to smile at a ball? Do not be angered, Yseulte. I should be glad if I could persuade you that it would be much wiser to smile often—and smile on others. Men are ungrateful, my cousin. The spaniel love is not what moves them most.'

I do not know why you should say this to me,' she murmured with embarrassment and offence. 'You presume too far on our relationship——'

'Pardon me!' said the Duc very humbly. 'My indignation is apt to outrun my prudence. I do not like to see—anyone—passively accept neglect. Neglect should be avenged. It is the only way in which it can be transformed into allegiance.'

Yseulte made a courageous effort to conceal her knowledge of the drift of his words.

'I cannot tell what you allude to,' she said coldly. 'Nor do I see why you should feel any anger for which you are not asked.'

'In the last century,' continued de Vannes, as though he had not heard her, 'there was a woman called Lescombat; she was very beautiful and had many lovers; she incited them to many crimes. One of them, Mongeôt, was condemned to be broken on the wheel for one of these crimes. He could have cleared himself if he had revealed her name; but he never did. He died on the wheel silent. She went to the Place de Grève and smiled to see his tortures. "Il ne fallait pas moins que cela pour faire rougir Mongeôt!" she cried so loud that he could hear her: he had always been very fair and pale. But he died mute, nevertheless. It is women like the Lescombat, my cousin, who are loved like that. Pauline de Beaumont, the very flower and perfection of womanhood, was only allowed as a reward for her devotion to follow her lover at a distance like a dog and die in Rome. It is always so.'

A chill passed over the girl as he spoke. She said wearily:

'Madame de Beaumont was as nature and religion made her; she could not have rivalled your Lescombat if she had wished.'

Then she rose and went away from him.

When she returned home to her own rooms, where she was now too often left as solitary as though she had been in her nun's cell at Faïel, she fell upon her knees before her crucifix and sobbed bitterly: she had seen that night how wistfully, and with what unconsciously revealed longing and regret, the eyes of Othmar had followed every movement of her rival.

To her ignorance, Nadine Napraxine was a woman as cruel, as evil, as terrible as the murderess Lescombat of whom the Duc de Vannes had spoken. All the innumerable intricacies of line, and the delicate half-tints of which such a character as hers was composed, made a study far beyond the girl's power of analysis, even had any such power been left to her in the confusion and the fever of her thoughts. She only saw in her a sorceress, whose merciless will and irresistible seduction drew her husband from her as the Greek ships of old that passed to the world of the east were drawn out of their safe straight road by the loadstone rocks of the Gulf of Arabia. A sense of entire helplessness and of unending despair came upon her in those glad sunlit flower-

filled Parisian days when all the pomp and pleasure which the great world could give were continually around her. If ever timidly and ashamed she ventured to reveal anything which she endured in the sanctity of the confessional, her confessor, an austere and fanatical recluse, always met her with the reply that, having turned as she had done from the paths of religion, she only met with her just retribution if the golden apples of terrestrial life, for which she had abandoned spiritual things, changed to ashes between her lips. She received no compassion from him and little consolation; she followed meekly the course of self-mortification he traced out for her; and, day by day, her cheek grew paler, her eye heavier, her step more slow and joyless.

She suffered as only a nature can suffer which is too sensitive to seek comfort in revealing itself, and too unused to the ways of the world to be able to find either distraction or compensation. No tortures would have wrung from her the confession of what she felt; she was ashamed of the passionate and piteous jealousy of which she was conscious; she thought it an offence against her husband and her God. But she could not resist its inroads into her peace; it grew and grew, and its insidious fires spread farther and farther in her simple soul, as a cancer spreads in healthy flesh.

She felt no sense of wrong; even in her own thoughts she uttered no reproach against him. In her own sight she was so utterly his debtor that she had no title to complain, even though he should wring her very heart with desertion. But a sickening despondency stole upon her little by little; each week brought with it some clearer sense of counting for nothing in his life, some sharper consciousness that she had no real place in his affections. Her perceptions, suddenly and cruelly aroused by the knowledge that he loved another woman than herself, became preternaturally keen in instinct and second-sight. She could tell in an instant, by the expression of his features, when he had seen her rival or when he had failed to meet her. Her mind, lately so ignorant of all the meanings of the world's babble, grew fatally alive to all its insinuations, its hints, its allusions, whenever these in aught concerned Nadine Napraxine. Her ear brought to her the faintest and most distant whispers in which the dreaded name was spoken. She became aware of the meaning of Othmar's glance, animated or absent, according as Nadine Napraxine was within his sight or not. She grew sensitive to all the different inflections of his voice, in which expectation, disappointment, pleasure, mortification, or impatience spoke. She was as susceptible to every change in him as the mercury to the frost and to the sun. Her whole existence was consumed in her study of him.

The self-restraint and the silence to which her early years had been trained, made her perfectly capable of repressing every outward sign of what she felt. Othmar saw no alteration in her;

he saw that she went eagerly into the world, and imagined that she, like all women, had learned to enjoy its frivolities. She was always calm, docile, cheerful; she had at all times a graceful answer to those with whom she spoke, an admirable manner in whatever scene she was placed in. He never divined how, beneath the serious smile on her mouth which served to hide the aching, wistful doubts and fears of her still childlike heart, how, beneath the pretty stateliness and gravity which he had first admired at Millo, and which never altered in her, there throbbed the poignant pain of a timid and impassioned affection—wasted.

If he had loved her, he might have seen something of it, little as men are able at any time to read the soul of a woman; but he was only kind to her, gentle to her, faithful—as yet—to her. He never loved her, and so all the wistful, lonely suffering went on and grew greater and greater unguessed by him. When he sat by her side in the opera-house, all he saw was Nadine Napraxine on the opposite side of the theatre; when he entered a ball-room, or a music-room, or a drawing-room before a dinner, all he looked for were the dark, languid, luminous eyes of the woman he adored, and when he met their glance, and saw across a crowded salon the irony of her slight and subtle smile, he only lived for her.

CHAPTER XLII.

This duel, if duel it could be called, since all the science and almost all the advantages were on one side, passed constantly in the presence and beneath the eyes of Othmar. But he was blind to it with the shortsightedness of a man; he was, even, more than once irritated by what he thought was an excess of kindness, an unusual interest, shown by the woman whom he loved to his wife. He hated to see them near each other. He scarcely disguised his restlessness when he noted any approach to intimacy between them. The remembrance of those two mornings at La Jacquemerille were for ever with him. He could not pardon Nadine Napraxine that she appeared so entirely to ignore their memory. True, he thought bitterly, it was she who had betrayed him, and it is always the betrayed who remembers, the betrayer who forgets. Had he said so much to her she would have answered: 'My friend, I did not betray you; I only told you I would reflect. I did reflect; if the result of my reflection was adverse to you, it was your misfortune perhaps, but it was also your fault.'

Once or twice Melville endeavoured to induce Nadine Napraxine to speak of the young girl of whose destinies he considered her the arbitress, but he never succeeded.

'She is very beautiful;' she always answered with that

talent in selecting what she could say truthfully, which was not the least of her wisdom. She added a few more words of eulogy, neither critical nor exaggerated; she did not permit him to have any glimpse of the consummate scorn joined to the sincere compassion with which she regarded the wife of Othmar, every one of whose emotions she read as though she read them in a book every time that the voice of Yseulte changed in greeting her or the girl's tell-tale colour rose, or faded, whenever she herself entered a room or looked at her across a theatre.

No one of all her lovers had ever been so completely mesmerised by her power as was this girl who held the name, the home, the honour of Othmar, while she herself held all his memory, all his desires, all his mind and heart and life.

It was the fascination of the ophidian for the dove. It gratified her sense of dominion, and aroused all her more cruel instincts. The reluctant fascination which she exercised over Yseulte; the visible effort with which the girl strove to escape from it and failed; the magnetism with which her gaze was rivetted and her ear strained to follow every movement, to catch every utterance of her foe; that helplessness, that unwilling, yet powerless, subjugation, excited all which was coldest, most contemptuous, most inexorable, in the soul of the woman in whose veins ran the blood of the assassins of Paul. That clairvoyance which is the gift of all rare intelligences, made her as conscious of all the bewildered thoughts which thronged the mind of Yseulte as though she saw them in the magic crystal of a sorcerer. She knew how, when she looked at the girl carelessly, smilingly, over the feathers of her fan or the flowers of her bouquet, across the sea of light of the opera-house, the whole soul of her innocent rival shrank and trembled within her, even whilst the natural courage, and resolution, and pride, of the de Valogne blood forced her to endeavour to resist, and enabled her to succeed in concealing, the fear and trouble which she felt.

'She is brave,' said Nadine Napraxine to herself with respect; but all the scorn which was in her made her add, without pity, 'but what a child!—how foolish!—how transparent!'

In that continual flux and reflux of society which incessantly brings together those of the same world and allows them to see each other perpetually, even though they remain strangers, the occasions were frequent, almost daily, in which she could study this poor aching heart, which was laid as bare to her as though Yseulte had had a mirror in her breast, and, for no victory and no caprice of her life, had she ever been so interested *de se faire belle* as now, when she was conscious that her imperial charm, her nameless irresistible powers of seduction, had thrown their magic net over the life which had most cause of all on earth to fear her own.

If he had known that she had suffered thus, his compassion and his sense of honour would have been aroused and have taken

alarm; but he was blind to it, as men dominated by an exclusive passion are blind to all outside it. His principles and his good taste would have made him his own most inexorable censor had he been in any act of his life faithless, in the gross meanings of the word, to the young life which he had united to his own. But he did not consider that a love which he pressed like a knife into the depths of his heart, and of which he believed he gave no outward sign whatever, did any wrong to Yseulte. She was still so young; she had all she desired; she would have children about her in other years; she was of that docile, feminine, unimpassioned nature which is easily content with the placid affections of the natural ties. He did not think that he betrayed her because, all unknown to her, he cherished in the depths of his own soul a bitter, cruel, hopeless, and yet most exquisite and most enduring passion. He had given her all which the world can give to any human creature; he did not realise that his lips were chill when he kissed her, his eyes indifferent when they glanced at her, his speech to her too often absent and conventional, his caresses too often forced, mechanical, and without any throb of warmth.

He knew well that if he were wise, even if he were faithful in intent to his wife, he would leave Paris whilst Nadine Napraxine was in it. His many possessions could have given him a hundred facile excuses for absence, and Yseulte would have gone willingly wherever he had chosen to take her. But he did not obey his conscience; he was swayed by his pride, which would not allow him to let the world say that he retreated before his sorceress, and he was held by that power which a great love exercises over the judgment and the volition. The mere glance of her eyes had fascination enough to destroy all his resolutions, and draw him into absolute oblivion of everything save herself. His passion for her was one of those which absence and denial intensify. He would make the arrangements of his whole day subordinate to one slight chance of meeting her for a moment in a crowd, of seeing her pass at a distance beneath the boughs of an avenue. He had received a mortal affront, a merciless insult, and yet he forgave them both; he was with her once more, he had no sense except of that one ecstasy. He was weak as a reed in her hands; he could have flung himself at her feet and kissed them. He knew that manliness, dignity, honour, duty, self-respect, all ought to have forbidden him to cross her threshold, but he was indifferent to them; they were mere names, without power, almost without meaning, for him. They had no more control over him than threads of silk upon the neck of a horse which has broken loose. She was before him, the one woman who was beautiful, beloved, and desired by him; and he realised that it had been of no use to try and cure a delirious fever with a simple draught of sweet herbs, as Melville had once said.

His own wife was nothing to him; the wife of Napraxine was

all. He despised and hated himself for his inconstancy where his fealty bound him, for his fidelity where he had only received light mockery and cruel provocation. But he could not change his nature, and the education which life had given him had contained no lesson in the art of self-denial. The world had always been at his feet; his desires had always been gratified and his wishes forestalled; he had never been used to subjugate his own inclinations; and this, the first evil which had ever tempted him, began to assail him with increasing force with every day which brought him within sight of the one woman whom he adored. She knew his weakness as she knew that of every human being who ever approached her, and she had no compassion for it. A man who had done her the insult of presuming to seek elsewhere consolation for her own indifference, had no mercy from her in his failure; he had offended her in the only vulnerable portion of her character, her supreme love of exclusive dominion. She was not vain with any common vanity, but the instincts towards absolute mastery were strong in her; whoever thwarted those instincts always repented his temerity in dust and ashes. Each step which Othmar made towards resumption of her yoke upon his passions, seemed to her only his due chastisement; every pang which she detected in him, every look of remorse, every imprudence of utterance or regard, pleased her as witness of his just degradation. In the many occasions which society gave her, she planted daggers in his breast with every cruelly chosen word she spoke, which was invariably veiled in easy irony or simulated friendliness, until his whole existence was consumed between the longing for, and the dread of, her approach. She had towards him a mingling of compassion, raillery, and kindness, which was of all means the one most certain to wound, excite, and enchain him. Whenever he was within hearing she was in her wittiest moods, her most brilliant aspects; all the various charms of her acute intelligence and of her high culture seemed increased tenfold after the simple childlike speech and the convent-bred mind of his young wife. He felt like a man who, long chained to a narrow, colourless, peaceful shore, is suddenly set free amidst the flowering labyrinths and the voluptuous colours of a tropical savannah.

Never had Nadine Napraxine been so willing to please, so facile to be pleased, as in the course of this Paris winter, when he was constantly within sight of her coquetteries, within earshot of her speeches. He watched her across a salon as a captive sunk in the depths of a prison may gaze at a summer sky beneath which he may never again stand a free man. The sense of his vicinity and of his suffering supplied that stimulant to life which her languid emotions needed; she viewed the drama of his regret and revolt with an interest in it half bitter, half sweet. A man who could have wedded another whilst he loved herself, deserved, she told herself, to suffer; yet there were moments when, beneath her

triumphs and her mockeries, there was in her own heart a thrill of answering pain; what might have been, glided also before her memory with pale reproach.

One night, entirely by chance, he and she were alone for a few minutes, that solitude in a crowd for which great entertainments give so much opportunity.

It was at a ball given by Prince Orloff; those hazards of society which it always amused her to subdue and turn to the service of her own intentions, had brought him to her side; some great palms made a little grove around them; the sound of the valse from Faust came dreamily from the distant ball-room.

'Do you know, Othmar, that I am disappointed in you?' she murmured, in her softest, cruellest, most malicious tones. 'I imagined that you would be so very good to your wife; you were always sighing to be an *homme d'intérieur*, you were always coveting solitude, sentiment, and sympathy. I expected to see you give us the example of a perfectly ideal union; but I am afraid that, after all, you are not much better than other men.'

'Madame——'

'Oh, you are angry, of course! Everyone is angry who is in the wrong. It is perfectly true, you are only a husband like ten thousand others. You were always a little like Chateaubriand: "Touriste, ambassadeur, ministre, ou amant, à peine arrivé, il s'ennuie."'

'It might be true of M. de Chateaubriand,' said Othmar, with displeasure, 'it is not so of me. I am most constant—where I have never been welcome.'

The confession escaped him despite himself, and he regretted it passionately as soon as it was uttered.

'That is why you are faithful,' said Nadine Napraxine, smiling. 'If you had been welcome, how poor and pale the whole country of your explorations would have seemed to you! There is only one way not to have shut on you those dreadful gates of disillusion; it is to be wise, and never to pass through them.'

'Your philosophies are, no doubt, madame, as correct as your observations,' said Othmar, with impatience.

'I pass my life in observing,' she replied. 'It is the only pursuit in society which has really any interest in it. But tell me, do you not a little, just a little, neglect your wife? It is a pity, she is so young; in time, if you be not there, someone else will be.'

'Never!' he interrupted, with some heat. 'I have many faults, no doubt, and I abandon them to your observation; but Yseulte has not a single defect that I have seen; she is loyalty, innocence, and honour incarnated.'

'They are three charming qualities,' replied Nadine Napraxine, 'but they do not appear to have any result except that of making

you dangerously confident that you may leave them wholly to themselves.'

Othmar coloured; he was sensible of the correctness of the accusation, and it irritated him excessively to hear the woman he loved rebuke him for his conduct to his wife.

'If I be too indifferent where all my allegiance should be given,' he said abruptly, 'the Princess Napraxine should be the last on earth to accuse me of it. She knows the cause.'

'The cause, I imagine, is in your temperament,' she replied, ignoring his meaning, 'as it was in Chateaubriand's.'

'Can we not leave Chateaubriand alone?'

'And speak only of yourself? It is a curious thing, but a man is never contented unless he is speaking solely of himself. It is the only entity in which he takes any real interest.'

'Perhaps it is the only one with which he is really conversant.'

'Oh, you must be conversant with your wife's. Her mind must be clear as crystal. Do you know, Othmar, I think you ought to be more grateful than you are; to have so very pure a creature as that to be the mother of your children, is a privilege to you and to your race.'

She spoke gravely for the moment, abandoning the ironical mockery of her habitual tone.

He rose abruptly.

'I cannot be grateful,' he said very low, with a passionate vibration in his voice. 'I was a fool, and I committed a great error. With all my life burnt up by one love, I imagined that I could slake the flames of it by contact with youth and innocence, as if the woodland brook could cool and arrest the boiling lava!'

Nadine Napraxine heard, with her languid lids drooped over her eyes, and the shadow of a smile upon her mouth.

'If it were so, you should be too proud to confess it,' she said, after a pause. 'To be sure it is not a very confidential confession, for everyone sees that your—experiment—has not been quite so successful as you hoped, as Baron Fritz, at least, hoped. Well, we have talked long enough in this solitude; you may take me to the ball-room.'

When he went home, no sleep came to him that night; his conscience and his pride rebuked him for the admission he had made, and before his eyes there passed ceaselessly the vision of Nadine Napraxine, pale, ethereal, magically seductive, like those figures of Herculaneum which float noiselessly in the air, their bodies delicate as the gossamer-winged body of the Deilephila.

And she had said to him, 'All the world sees that your experiment has not succeeded!'

The words added the one drop of mortification and of bitterness which was alone wanting in the cup which he had of his own

weakness and of his own will filled for himself, and was forced by the justice of fate to drink.

She herself drove homeward alone through the chilly shadows of the dawn, which could not touch her, wrapped in her eider-down lined satins, and reclining amongst her yielding cushions. A beggar woman sitting on a doorstep with a sick child sleepless in her arms, saw the carriage pass, and thought, 'What must it feel like to roll on like that, clad like that, warm and happy like that, with the price of a million loaves of bread in one single stone at your throat?'

Nadine Napraxine would have told her that food and warmth and jewels were no especial pleasure, when you had been always used to them; perhaps the absence of them might be painful—so much she would have granted.

She drove homeward, and went up to her white dressing-room with a vague sense of impatience and of regret stirring within her.

How he loved her, how he loved her, although he had been madman enough to give his life to another in an insane attempt to attain oblivion!

She did not lie down, but when her women had undressed her and wrapped her in her loose warm wrappers, she sat long looking dreamily into the fire burning on the open hearth, for the night of April was chilly within doors though without nightingales began to sing amidst the lilac buds. He would still, if she chose, go far away from all duty, all honour, all the ways of the world and the respect of men. Almost it tempted her, that which she had rejected two years before. There was another life to be hurt now! Friederich Othmar had perchance read her temperament aright when he had thought that the power to make misery would have greater force to attract her than the power to confer happiness.

'I suppose I must be what the good dullards call wicked,' she thought with a smile at herself, and a certain vague emotion of disgust at her own impulse.

Was she wicked? Was anybody so? Was there ever anything in human nature beyond impatience, ennui, inquisitiveness, natural love of dominion, and wholly instinctive egotism? Did not these, collectively or singly, suffice to account for all human actions?

CHAPTER XLIII.

A FEW days later Nadine Napraxine was surprised and annoyed at receiving in the forenoon a request from her husband that she would be so good as to receive him for a few moments.

'Beg the Prince to excuse me,' she said to her women. 'I am tired and must go out in an hour.'

Never once in the years of their marriage had Napraxine ever ventured to insist after such a message, or to revolt against her decisions. She was astonished and exceedingly irritated when they brought her a pencilled note in which were written some blurred words: 'Pray pardon me, but I have urgent reasons to desire to see you without delay; I must entreat of you to admit me, if only for a moment.'

'*Quelle corvée!*' she murmured, as she reluctantly gave the order to let him enter. The companionship of her husband, at all times wearisome to her, had become in the last few weeks more than usually intolerable.

'I must beg of you not to send me these autocratic demands,' she said, with much impatience, as he entered. 'You want my women sent away? Why should they be sent away? What can you possibly have to say that may not be heard from the housetops?'

Looking at him with irritation and undisguised dislike, she saw an expression upon his face which was new there; he motioned the maids away with authority; he was disturbed and excited; he had nevertheless a certain dignity and anger in his attitude.

'Do you know, madame,' he said abruptly when they were alone, being scarcely conscious of what he did say, 'that here in Paris there are persons who venture to hint that—that—that Othmar has been for many years at your feet? That his marriage was only one of pique? That even now he neglects his wife because of you? Had you any idea of this? Can you tell me what possible foundation there is for it? Oh, do not think for a moment that I pay any heed to it, only I would like to know why—when——'

Entangled in his words and in his ideas, he stammered, breathed heavily, came to a full pause; he dared not accuse her, did not even accuse her in his own thoughts; but the sudden knowledge that her name was spoken in union with Othmar's had so galled and stunned him that he had lost his usual patience, his habitual timidity, before her.

His wife heard him with a contraction of her eyebrows, which was the only sign she ever gave of anger; her eyes were cold and haughty; her whole countenance was as unrevealing as the

marble features of her bust by Dupré which stood on a table near. For the sole time in her life she was not prepared with a reply; the various memories which had united herself and Othmar had been always so carefully veiled from the knowledge of others that she had never imagined any outer light would be ever shed upon them. The world had certainly seen at one time that Othmar loved her, and had been ready to sacrifice his life at her word, but that had been long ago; she had not supposed that the emotions which her clairvoyance had discovered, the mesmerism which she still exercised, had had any spectators. But if for the moment surprised, she was never for a moment at fault. She looked steadily at her husband, with the delicate lines of her eyebrows drawn together in a frown, which lent a strange severity to her features.

'My dear Prince,' she said slowly and coldly; 'you have known my character for nearly eight years. I cannot tell whether the opportunities you have had of understanding it have been employed to the utmost, or whether your powers of comprehension have been not altogether equal to the task. But one thing at least I should have supposed you would have learned in all that time—I should have thought you would have understood that I do not permit impertinent interrogation, or even interrogation at all. I never ask you questions; I expect never to be asked them.'

Napraxine stood before her like a chidden child; his long habit of deference to her will and fear of her superiority were still in the ascendant with him, but struggling against them were his own manliness, and a vague, new-born suspicion, strengthened by a certain evasiveness, which even his sluggish intelligence perceived, in her reply.

'After all,' he said, somewhat piteously and irrelevantly; 'after all, Nadège, I am your husband.'

'Unhappily!'

The single word so chill and so contemptuous was cast at him like a blow with crystals of ice. He shrank a little.

'No doubt you think so, though I have done what I could,' he said, humbly repressing the pang he felt. 'But unhappily or not, the fact is a fact. You permit me very few conjugal rights, but there is one which you will not surely deny me—the right to know what truth or untruth there is in these stories of Othmar?'

'You speak like a *juge d'instruction*!' she said, with all her customary disdain. 'You ought to let no one tell you those or any other stories. It is yourself whom they make ridiculous, not me.'

'No one shall make me so long,' he muttered. 'If you will not answer me, I will go to him.'

She raised her head haughtily and looked him full in the face with that gaze wherewith she was accustomed to cow and to

coerce men as the shepherd's voice intimidates and rules the sheep.

'That would be certainly original,' she said, with a slight suggestion of laughter. 'A husband going to an imaginary lover to beg him to reveal how high he stood in the favour of his wife! —it would be original if it would not be dignified. I wonder what Othmar would answer you! You will admit that it would be a great temptation to his vanity—and his invention!'

Napraxine paced a few steps to and fro the room in an agitation which every one of her languid and contemptuous words increased; a kind of hopelessness always came over him in the presence of his wife; it was so impossible to move, to touch, to hold, to comprehend her. The calm raillery, the chill imperious anger, which were all he ever could excite in her, left his heart so shrunken and wounded, his pride so humiliated and baffled.

He paused before her suddenly.

'Nadège,' he said, with a tremor in his voice: 'You know that I have always liked Othmar. You asked me once why. It is not much of a narrative. This is it. One day, years and years ago, when he was quite a youth, we chanced to travel together in Russia. There was a movement of agrarian revolt at that time. As we passed a village in the province of Moscow we came upon a horrible conflagration; there were incendiary fires; great sheepfolds and cattle-pens were burning. I—Heaven forgive my selfishness! — would have driven on; I only wanted to get to Moscow itself in time for a masked ball at the Kremlin; but Othmar would not; he sprang out of the carriage and rallied a few men around him, and plunged right into the flames to save the sheep and the cattle, or such of them as he could; of course when he did that, I had no choice but to do the same. We worked all night; we saved thousands of the beasts, but we lost the ball at the Kremlin. I do not say it was anything very great to do. I dare say numbers of other young men would have done as much; but the remembrance of it has always made me like Othmar. If you had seen him scorched, and singed, and black with smoke, his hair burnt and his hands blistered, dragging the rams and the ewes, driving the bullocks and heifers, the flames curling up over the grass which was as dry as chips, for it was in the month of August;—I have always liked him ever since; he is not the mere ennuyé that they think him.'

He paused abruptly; his wife's eyes had a conflicting expression in them; there was emotion and there was mockery.

'Oh fool!—oh poor big innocent fool!' she thought, '*you* to praise Otho Othmar to me!'

Yet something in what he had said softened her cynical intolerance of his questions and made her more merciful to him. The only qualities which were ever admirable to her in her husband were his courage and his sympathy with courage. They

were not uncommon attributes, but they were those which always had affinity to hers. And the half-grotesque, half-pathetic ignorance which was visible as he spoke of Othmar moved her to a certain indulgence in all her scorn.

'He is so stupid, but he is so honest,' she thought, as she had thought so often before, with a feeling of compassion which might in any other woman have been a pang of conscience. However, the passing sentiment could not altogether exclude her more dominant instincts of raillery, her not easily appeased offence at interrogation and interference.

'I do not really see, my dear Napraxine,' she said languidly, 'what possible connection singed sheep and burning heifers have to do with the rumours which—you say—society has been so good as to set on foot concerning me. It is unfortunate that your ideas are always so entangled that it is very difficult to follow them. But I imagine, so far as I can evolve anything from such a chaos, that what you intend me to understand by all this is, that because one summer night in Russia long ago you were witness of a courageous action on the part of—your friend—you would be sorry to suppose that he would commit one which would make him your enemy: is that so?'

Napraxine made a gesture of assent.

'I cannot express myself well,' he murmured. 'But you are so clever you can always understand——'

'To sort the black and the white beans set to Psyche for a task were easier,' quoted his wife, with her enigmatical smile. 'Still, if I interpret your meaning aright, it is that. Pray, then, let your mind be at rest; the Countess Othmar is not neglected that I know of, and if she be, *je n'y suis pour rien*.'

Then she poured out her chocolate. Napraxine was reassured by her indifferent manner, and did not observe that the major part of his interrogations was still left unanswered.

'I was sure of it,' he said with warmth. 'He is very much in love with her, is he not?'

She gave a slight, most eloquent gesture, indicative of absolute ignorance and of as absolute indifference.

'Ah! that is another matter which I could not presume to decide,' she answered with a little yawn. 'He has been married fourteen months; men are not usually in love so long as that.'

'I——' began Napraxine: then he stammered, paused, and coloured, afraid of her ridicule.

'Yes; you were,' said his wife, serenely. 'But it is very unusual; it is very undesirable. I do not think it contributed to your comfort; it certainly did not to mine.'

Napraxine sighed.

'I should have never changed,' he said with ardour, though with timidity, as though he were a lover of eighteen.

'You have never changed,' she said with that smile which she

could render enchanting in sweetness and in graciousness. 'You have always been much better to me than I have deserved, and you have always been the most generous and the most amiable of men. Now go; I have many things to do, and I want my women.'

Napraxine grew red with pleasure at her praise, and his pale eyes shone with eagerness, delight, and the admiration which she had hated so intensely in the early years of their marriage. He stooped towards her, breathless with his gratitude, and his hopes suddenly aroused after so many years of despair and of resignation.

'Nadine,' he murmured. 'Even now—now—if you would? None of them have loved you as I do.'

She stretched out her hand so that his lips, which would fain have gone elsewhere, were forced to remain there.

'Perhaps,' she said vaguely, still with that enchanting smile which was to him like a glimpse into Paradise itself. 'Do not ask for too much at first; *au revoir*.'

Then she rang for her maids, and he was forced to withdraw; but he went with all the forces of a re-awakened passion throbbing in his veins and beating at his heart, like a swarm of bees roused by a ray of warmth from winter torpor.

She, as soon as his step had ceased to echo along the distant corridors, and the sound of wheels and horses' feet in the courtyard below told her that he was about to leave the house, dismissed her women, saying that she wished to sleep, and sat alone, with a sense of strong disgust and of vague anxiety upon her.

'I could not allow him to provoke Othmar,' she thought. 'Anything but that! anything but that!'

She would have been capable of any self-sacrifice, of any concession to her husband, which could have prevented the hostile meeting of those men.

A sudden tide of strong emotion swept over her self-centred and languid life. In that one moment, in which she had become conscious of a possible danger to Othmar, she had become as conscious of the full force of her regard for him. Love, which had been her victim, her plaything, her instrument, her servitor, for so long, became at length the guest of her own heart, and was stronger than herself. She had driven that danger away from his path by the skill of her consummate finesse; but she was not wholly reassured, and if to save him from her husband's suspicions she would be compelled to make herself the recipient of her husband's re-awakened tenderness, she felt that the price would be more hateful than death.

Even the momentary constraint and feigning which she had put upon herself with her husband stung all her pride, offended all her dignity; she could take no delight in it as she did usually in the admirable issues of her most admirable skill in seduction

and dissimulation. A certain impression, which was not profound enough to be shame but had its character, remained with her. She had been successful as usual, but success did not content her. She was exceedingly proud; her delicacy, which was as susceptible as any sensitive plant to any rude approach, shrank from the path into which she had entered. She could take an intellectual pleasure in adroit dissimulation, but she had no pleasure in deceiving an honest confidence. She had always despised with all the scorn of her nature the covered ways of intrigue, the hidden resorts of illicit desires; her taste as well as her pride had always preserved her from the pitfalls to which other women danced with light hearts and light steps. Some sense of approaching these perils touched her now and offended her, as with the presence of some vulgar thing. She saw clearly enough what Othmar perhaps did not or would not see, that their mutual love would soon or late take them on that same road which all lovers have taken since the days when the Book was read beneath the garden trees of Rimini. She was not alarmed or troubled in any moral sense, but her delicacy and her hauteur were disturbed. For the first time, she felt that it was possible for events and sentiments to have more control over her than she had over them; for the first time she had the sensation of being drawn on by fate in lieu of herself controlling it.

CHAPTER XLIV.

In the excitation of his new hopes and of his happy self-delusions her husband's suspicions had all died away; he did not even notice how completely she had avoided all direct answer to the questions which had at the first so offended her. He had not the faintest conception of how completely he had been put off his guard, intoxicated by suggested concessions, and enwrapped in the blinding fumes of awakening affections.

He went, with his usual heavy and slow tread, but with a heart as light as a youth's who has heard the first words of encouragement from lips he loved, out into the noon-day glare of the Paris streets. During these six years through which his wife had been no more to him than the tea-rose which she liked to wear at her throat, he had grown reconciled to the inevitable. He had consoled himself with the thousand and one consolations with which women are always ready to strew the path of a rich man; he had not, after the first shock of her dislike, greatly rebelled or greatly mourned; and he had been what his world called a *vieux enragé*. Yet at the depths of his soul there had been always—living, tenacious, indestructible, exceedingly humble,

and infinitely forgiving—a great love for his wife. If she had cared, she could have done what she chose with him; he would have led the life of an anchorite to win her favour, and there would have been no heroism and no folly to which she could not have impelled him. She had never seen in him anything except a heavy, stupid, good-humoured man, who could have a very good manner when it was wanted, but had hardly more intelligence than one of his own *moujiks*. She never saw the possibilities of self-negation and of blind devotion which slumbered in his nature because she never felt interest enough in him to look for them. To see as little of him as was possible, whilst still remaining in accordance with the etiquette of the world, was all her study where Platon Napraxine was concerned.

That he loved her very much she was fully aware—loved her as only big dogs and unintellectual people have the instinct to do—but the higher qualities which were in him, and might have been called out had she chosen, she never knew or would have cared to know. The natural nobility of his character was entirely obscured to her beneath the slowness and dulness of his intelligence, as his corpulent body and his large appetite wholly concealed the heroism of poor Louis Seize from France and from the world.

Napraxine, when he left her now, walked straight to a private club which he often frequented; a club of great exclusiveness and distinction, where very high play could be indulged in every morning, afternoon, and evening. There he breakfasted, played a little himself to while away time, and waited the coming of the Duc de Prangins. He waited until four o'clock; at that hour, which was his usual one for entrance there, the elder de Prangins arrived from his customary afternoon baccarat.

Napraxine threw down the cards he held, rose, and approached him.

'M. le Duc,' he said curtly, 'I have learned that you have ventured to jest about Madame la Princesse Napraxine. I am here to tell you that I do not allow such jests. If you apologise for them—well. If not——'

'I never apologise,' said the Duc, as curtly.

Napraxine, without more words, struck him over the shoulders with a cane which he carried. Then he turned his back on him with supreme disdain, and sat down again to his écarté.

To such an insult there was only one answer possible. Within fifteen minutes a hostile meeting was arranged between him and M. de Prangins, which was to take place on the following morning at sunrise, in the gardens of a friend's château situated on the road to Versailles.

The elder de Prangins, though a man of sixty-five years of age, was of great skill and address in all offensive and defensive science; it was he who had killed the young Piedmontese prince, d'Ivrea, some four years before. He was a slightly-made man, but very

strong and agile, cold and sure in his attack, and very careful in his guard. He had the reputation of being a dangerous foe, and, secure in that reputation, had never condescended to bridle his tongue, which was at once coarse and caustic. For Nadine Napraxine he had conceived, years earlier, one of those gross, yet chill, passions of which a man, advanced in years, is at once tenacious and impatient, proud and ashamed.

Platon Napraxine finished his game of écarté and won it. He was in no degree disturbed or depressed by the ordeal which lay before him. He was as happy as a boy to think that he was about to fight in her cause, and he pictured to himself how, when all was over, he would tell her, and perhaps—perhaps—she would smile on him for the recital. Like many big, strong, and kindly men, he had a great deal of the lad in him; he was unworn in heart, despite all the experiences of his life in Paris and in Petersburg; the adoration of his wife, which he had preserved throughout all the vulgar amours with which he had sought to console himself, had served, in a great measure, to keep his youth alive in him. With a youth's hopefulness and short-sightedness he longed now for the moment in which he would say to her, 'They dared to jest of you, but I was there; and they have bitten the dust.'

That night she dined at one house and he dined at another; she went later to more than one ball, at which she showed herself for a brief hour of the cotillon and then took herself away, knowing that after her presence there all other women would pale and pall, as the stars fade, or seem to fade, when a meteor passes. She and Othmar had met that night at more than one house, and she had kept him beside her more openly and for a longer time than she had ever done before. It was her manner of reply to her husband's suspicions and to the conjectures of the world.

Platon Napraxine returned home earlier than usual, and waited in a little smoking-room which opened on to the head of the staircase that he might hear her arrival, and see her once, if only as she passed up the stairs. It was only midnight when he went home, and he waited one, two, three, four hours; then he heard the carriage roll into the inner court and the door of the private entrance open. He left the *fumoir* and walked a few steps downward to meet her as she ascended the staircase. His heart thrilled as he saw her in her cloak, made of soft blush-coloured feathers, with her delicate head emerging from it as from some rose-tinted cloud. She herself perceived him waiting there with that involuntary irresistible sense of annoyance which was always her first emotion whenever she saw him anywhere.

She gave him a little careless smile, nodded a good-night, and would have gone onward, but he stopped her timidly.

'Give me one of those,' he said, as he touched the knot of tea-roses which were fastened at her breast.

'What nonsense!' she said impatiently, with much real irri-

tation, as she mused, 'If he play the lover, I shall not keep my patience!'

Her cloak parted and fell a little off one arm. His eyes dwelled passionately on the whiteness of her shoulder, with the great diamonds sparkling on it, and the jewelled butterflies trembling as though they took the blue veins for azure flowers.

With an obstinacy which he had never dared to show to her before he drew away one of the tea-roses.

'Do not be angry,' he murmured.

She shrugged her shoulders with sovereign indifference and contempt, and passed up the stairs.

He looked after her with dim longing eyes.

No shadow of any sort had been upon him throughout that sunny day—the last day of April.

The next morning he went with a perfectly light heart to the garden outside Paris which had been chosen as the scene of his encounter with the Duc de Prangins. He had fought many duels in his time; he was a fine fencer, though of late he had neglected to keep his hand in practice, and he was a man always of the coolest and most stolid courage. He had no kind of apprehension of the result; he had taken no measures in case he should fall; it seemed so entirely impossible; besides, all his affairs were in order, all his vast wealth was disposed of with legal accuracy and care in documents which were safe in their iron safes in the muniment room of Zaraizoff; he went to his appointment with no more thought or apprehension than he would have gone to the 'tir aux pigeons.'

He lighted a large cigar and stood chatting with his friends to the last moment. Now and then he put his hand in his coat; it was to feel for the little rose he had taken from her the day before; but his friends could not know that.

For some moments after the rapiers crossed the duel was bloodless; a mere display of even and perfect science on each side; but at the third encounter his guard was broken; the sword of the Duc de Prangins entered his left side and passed straight through the left lung out beneath the shoulder; his adversary could not draw it back; with the blade transfixing his breast thus, Platon Napraxine fell heavily to the ground. When they endeavoured to raise him he looked at them, and his lips moved; it was only the hoarsest murmur, but it said once, twice, thrice—'Do not tell her! Do not tell her! Do not tell her!'

They let him lie where he was; they gathered about him pale and in silence. They all knew he was a dead man.

For one moment he looked up at the pale blue morning sky where the clouds were drifting and a flock of swallows was circling with gay buoyant movement; there were all the odours of spring on the air, and the grass which he lay on was yellow with kingcups and white with daisies. With his right hand he feebly

made the sign of the cross on his breast; then he thrust the same hand within his coat once more, and with a terrible shuddering, choking sigh his last breath passed away. When they unloosened his lifeless fingers they found them clasped on a faded tea-rose.

'Who will tell Princess Napraxine?' said the men around him, with white lips, to one another.

The man who had killed him, throwing on his great coat in haste, said with a cruel smile:

'She will have a Te Deum in every church in Paris. You waste your pity.'

CHAPTER XLV.

NADINE NAPRAXINE had just quitted her bath-room, and was taking her chocolate, when her women, vaguely frightened and so venturing to disobey her, brought her word that Prince Ezarhédine begged to see her for a few moments on an urgent matter. It was noon. She was never visible until three in the daytime in Paris. She was at first indignant at such an insolence, then made curious by such an intrusion. Ezarhédine had been one of her husband's familiar associates, but he had never been an intimate friend of her own.

'What can he want?' she said irritably. 'Send M. Valisoff to him.'

Valisoff was her own secretary.

But when her servants insisted, contrary to all their usual timid obedience to her rules, her inquisitiveness was excited; she consented to receive the unbidden and ill-timed visit. She cast about her a loose gown of cream-hued China crape, embroidered with pansies and primroses, put her feet into slippers which were embroidered like it, and with her beautiful arms seen through the loose sleeves, and her eyes still suffused with the languor of her morning sleep, she passed out into the small salon adjoining her dressing-chamber.

Prince Ezarhédine, ushered in there, bowed to the ground, and then stood looking at her strangely. He was very pale, and there was a tremor about his mouth.

'Madame,' he murmured, and then paused; his voice could not be commanded.

She, with her wonderful and instantaneous penetration into the minds of those who spoke to her, divined his mission in that one moment in which his eyes met hers. She went a step nearer to him, herself looking like some Aurora of the Italian painters, with her white floating flower-embroidered robes and her loose hair bound by an amethyst-hued ribbon.

'What have you come to tell me?' she said, in a strange, low voice. 'Is my husband—dead?'

Ezarhédine bowed in silence.

She shuddered slightly from head to foot; her eyes opened wide with an expression of great terror; her lips turned white. She sat down on the nearest seat, and motioned to him to be seated by her.

'Has he fought with Othmar?' she said hoarsely, so low that her words were scarcely intelligible.

'With Othmar? No, madame,' Ezarhédine answered in surprise; and told her with whom he had fought and how he had died.

She heard in perfect silence; but the colour had returned to her lips.

'Poor Napraxine; he died for her sake, and it is only of Othmar that she thought,' mused Prince Ezarhédine as he left her house when his painful mission was over.

CHAPTER XLVI.

Othmar was in his own house that day at two o'clock looking at a portrait, by Cabanel, of his wife, which had been sent home in the forenoon, and which had been left standing in the salon, where she passed most of her hours. The portrait was one of the triumphs of that elegant master. He had painted her in a gown of white velvet, with her favourite peacocks near, and some high shrubs of red azaleas to lend her the contrast of rich colour. The whole composition was a masterpiece of softness, brilliancy, and sunshine. Othmar stood looking at it and speaking of it to the Baron and to Yseulte when Alain de Vannes was ushered into the room, and, scarcely pausing for the usual ceremonies of salutation, said abruptly to him: 'You have heard the news of the morning? Napraxine is dead.'

The Duc had calculated the effect of his abrupt speech. Othmar, on whose features the full light was falling from a window of which the curtains had been drawn back for the examination of Cabanel's portrait, changed colour violently, and his whole face expressed the force of conflicting emotions with which he was moved. Yseulte watched him, fascinated with a vague terror; she had never seen him violently moved under the influence of any strong feeling.

Friederich Othmar, alone retaining his calmness, answered in amazement: 'Napraxine! Napraxine dead! Are you certain?

I saw him last night at midnight; he was in full health and spirits.'

'Nevertheless he is dead,' said De Vannes, keeping his gaze on Othmar; and he related the circumstances of the duel.

Othmar listened in profound silence; he had recovered his self-control, but the colour had not returned to his face.

'What was the cause?' asked Friederich Othmar, when he had heard all that there was to hear.

Alain de Vannes shrugged his shoulders.

'De Prangins had spoken jestingly of the Princess — and someone else. Napraxine heard of it through some lamentable indiscretion; he insulted the old Duke; and the result is what I have said. He was run through the lungs and died in a few moments. De Prangins relieved Madame Napraxine of a troublesome lad in young d'Ivrea; he has now done her a still greater service by ridding her of the only ennui in her life which she was sometimes compelled to endure. I do not know who told her what had happened, but the body of Napraxine has already been taken to his house. The duel was fought in a private garden at Versailles.'

Then he paused, having no more to say, and, like a good orator, being unwilling to destroy by detail and diffuseness the effect of his unexpected statement.

Othmar muttered a few sentences of conventional regret and turned away to where the picture stood. Yseulte followed him with wistful eyes. She felt that the news had shocked and startled him strangely, but she was afraid to seem to have remarked his agitation. After a few moments he made some trivial excuse, and left the room.

Friederich Othmar resumed his occupation of examining Cabanel's work through a lorgnon: people whom he knew died every day; it was not such a simple event as that which could cause him any excitement, and Platon Napraxine, though a very great person in his own way, had no place in the public life of Europe.

The Duc de Vannes approached Yseulte.

'My cousin,' he said with gentle mockery, 'was poor Napraxine such a favourite of yours that you look so stricken with sorrow? If I had known that my intelligence would have caused such regret, I would have been less precipitate in relating it.'

Yseulte coloured; she was conscious that it was her husband's emotion, not hers, at which he jested.

'Death is always terrible,' she murmured, not knowing what to say. 'And Prince Napraxine always seemed so well, so strong, so full of health——'

De Vannes laughed a little grimly.

'Poor Napraxine had only one vulnerable point—his heart; some gossiper pecked at that as jays peck at fruit; and this is

the end. You know he adored his wife, most unfortunately for himself; she is called the Marie Stuart of our day, and to complete the parallel, it was necessary for her to be the cause of her husband's death.'

'But—she must suffer now,' said Yseulte, her golden eyes dim and dark with feeling.

'Suffer?' echoed Alain de Vannes. 'I see you do not know Madame Napraxine, though you meet so often. The long strict Russian mourning and all the religious rites will weary her terribly. Beyond that, she will not be much distressed, and she will have many—consolations.'

'She has children,' said Yseulte.

The Duc smiled.

'It was not of her children that I was thinking,' he said with meaning.

Friederich Othmar turned round from his examination of the portrait.

'My child,' he said to Yseulte, 'will you pardon me if I remind you that your horses have been waiting a long time, and that the *matinée* at Princess Hohenlohe's will be more than half over. M. le Duc will be kind enough to excuse the hint; he is always so amiable.'

Yseulte, who was still obedient with the unquestioning submission of her childish days, rose and bade adieu to her cousin, then went to her own apartments.

Friederich Othmar turned to the Duke:

'Shall we walk down the boulevard together?' he suggested, whilst he thought to himself, 'That fox shall not get at her ear if I can help it.'

While Alain de Vannes assented and they sauntered down the staircase of Othmar's house, the Duc said with a pleasant little laugh:

'Ah, my dear Baron, if this duel had taken place with the same results fifteen months ago my little cousin would not have been mistress here!'

'Who knows?' said Friederich Othmar, vaguely, with that bland indifference which was his favourite mask and weapon.

CHAPTER XLVII.

As Yseulte went to her own room her way led her past the great cedar-wood doors of her husband's library, that retreat where he passed so many of those hours of meditation and of pain—such hours as in old days led men of his nature to the isolation of the cloister. He had always told her that she was free to enter there;

but the delicacy of her temper had always made her use the privilege but rarely; so rarely, that he had ceased ever to be afraid of her entrance in moments when the lassitude or the dejection of his life overcame him and made him little willing to meet her gaze. Now, as she passed by the door, a wistful impulse moved her to see him, to speak to him, to be spoken to by him. She had an instinctive feeling that this news of Napraxine's death had caused him a greater shock than she could comprehend or measure; all the affection, the adoration, which she bore him went out to him in this incomprehensible sorrow.

'If he would only tell me,' she thought.

Inspired by that longing for his confidence, she opened the door. Othmar sat at his writing-table, and his head was bowed down on his arms; his back was to her, but his whole attitude expressed extreme weariness, exceeding sorrow. When he sprang to his feet at the sound of the opening doors, she saw that his eyes were wet with tears. He suppressed both his emotion and his irritation as best he could, and said to her gently:

'Do you want me, my dear? Wait a moment; I will be with you.'

He turned from her as if to sort some papers on his table. She did not advance; she stood looking at him with a scared, colourless face: a truth had come into her mind swift and venomous as an adder. She thought suddenly:

'If I were not here—she could be his wife—now.'

The secret of his uncontrollable emotion at the tidings of Napraxine's death was laid bare to her in one of those flashes of thought which light up the brain as lightning illumines the landscape. She murmured some vague words and left the room: her long training in silence and self-suppression gave her strength to repress the cry which rose to her lips.

Othmar scarcely heeded her departure or heard her answer: his own pain and restless rebellion against the fate which he had made for himself absorbed him.

'Poor innocent child!' he thought once with self-reproach. 'She must never know; it was I who sought her—I must keep her in her illusions as best I may.'

He did not know that her illusions had been killed in that moment of cruel certainty, as once in the church of S. Pharamond his orchids and azaleas had perished in a single night of frost.

She told her people to have the horses taken back to the stables: she felt unwell; she would not go out that morning; then she locked herself in her own apartments. She could not face that world of Paris, which would be speaking all the day of one theme—the death of Prince Napraxine.

It was the last day of April; the sunshine was streaming through the gardens of the great hotel, and through her open windows there came the scent of opening lilac buds and blossom-

ing hawthorn boughs. Like the year and the earth, she was in the early sweetness of her youth; yet old age hardly knows a more chill and cruel sense of loneliness and desolation than was with her now as she lay, face downward, on her bed, and sobbed her youth away. With instantaneous and merciless force the truth had broken in upon her at last; she suddenly realised that she had no place in the heart of Othmar, and was but a burden on his life. She realised that she had been taken in pity, wedded in generosity and compassion, but without one passing gleam or throb of love. She marvelled that she could have been so blind before. All the memories which thronged upon her brought with them a thousand inexorable witnesses of the truth. The knowledge of the world which she had learned of late was like a lamp shedding its cruel rays on every damning fact.

For long she had known, she had felt, that her husband cared only for one woman upon earth, and that woman not herself. But never until now had the conviction come to her of how cruelly and eternally she barred the way between him and his happiness and his desires. The weakness and the defects of the early training which she had received now told upon her character, making her shut close in her own soul all she suffered, and enabling her to keep perfect silence on all she had discovered. Without that acquired habit of reserve, her natural candour and trustfulness would have impelled her to give some confidence, to receive some counsel, in her dire distress, would have even brought her to her husband's side. But the pride which was in her blood was united with the power of self-repression engendered by the teachings she had received. In any sorrow which had not also been humiliation, in any fault which had been her own, not his, she would have thrown herself at Othmar's feet and confessed all that she felt. But this was impossible to her now; the words would have choked her; she could not say to him: 'I know I am only a pensioner on your pity and your generosity;' she could not say to him, 'I know that I stand between you and one whom you loved before ever you saw me.' More undisciplined and less delicate tempers might have found some refuge in such passionate lamentation and revelation, but to Yseulte de Valogne such outbursts of reproach were impossible; they would have been contrary to every habit of her young life, to every tradition of the order and of the race from which she sprang. 'The vulgar cry out when they are hurt,' her grandmother had said once to her during the siege of Paris; 'but for us—there are only two things possible—either vengeance or silence.'

Those words came back upon her mind as she lay upon her bed, whilst the sweet fresh winds of the spring-time blew the scent of the lilac and hawthorn across her chamber. Vengeance there could be none for her; he had been her saviour, her protector, her kindest friend, her lover, whom she adored with all the ignorant,

innocent, mute worship of first love; there only remained the alternative—silence.

There was something of the dumb obstinacy of the Breton in her, and much also of the Breton force of heroism; the heroism which does not speak, but bears and acts, immovable and uncomplaining. That great strength of endurance enabled her now to recover her self-control by the time that she was forced to meet Othmar again, and to go into her drawing-rooms at eight o'clock before the hour of dinner, with no trace of what she had suffered upon her except in the pallor of her face and the dark shade beneath her eyes.

'Are you feeling ill, my dear child?' said her husband, as he met her. 'I hear you have not been out to-day, and you had many engagements?'

She murmured some vague answer;—she had been lying down; her head ached.

He answered her with some tender expressions of regret, and inquired no more. Her health was delicate and fluctuating at that moment; he supposed that it was natural that she had such occasional hours of depression.

They chanced to be alone at dinner that evening, which was unusual. Neither of them spoke many words. When he addressed her it was with the utmost kindliness and gentleness of tone, but he said little, and his own preoccupation prevented him from noticing how constrained were her replies, how forced her smiles.

She observed, with a cruel tightening of her heart, that he never alluded to the death of his friend Napraxine.

When dinner was over, she said to him very calmly:

'There are several engagements for to-night too, but if you will allow me, I will stay at home. I am a little—tired.'

'Certainly, my dear,' he said at once. 'Never go into the world but when it amuses you; and your health is of far more value than any other consideration. Shall I call your physicians?'

'Oh no; it is nothing. I am only a little fatigued,' she said hurriedly; and as he stooped to touch her cheek with his lips she turned her head quickly, and for the first time avoided his caress.

He was too absorbed in his own thoughts even to observe the significance of the involuntary gesture. He led her to the doors of her own apartments, kissed her hand, and left her.

'Sleep well,' he said kindly, as he might have spoken to a sick child.

But to Yseulte it seemed that she would never sleep again.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

For some days his world spoke only of the death of Platon Napraxine in the full vigour of his manhood. Men regretted him honestly, and many women mourned for him as sincerely, if with less disinterestedness. His body was taken to Zaraïzoff, and there consigned to rest amidst the dust of his ancestors with all the pomp and splendour of a funeral, barbaric and gorgeous, like every other ceremony of his country. His mother and his little sons were there; his wife was absent. She had withdrawn herself to a secluded château on the Lake of Geneva, which had been the property of her father, and no one had access to her.

What did she feel? No one could know; scarcely could she have told, herself, so entangled and so conflicting were the emotions by which she was swayed. Two sentiments alone were distinct to her amidst the uncertainty of her thoughts; the one was regret that her last words had been to him words impatient and unkind; the other an intense rage against herself that by one involuntary question she had betrayed herself to Prince Ezarhédine. It had been the solitary moment in all her life in which anxiety had conquered her composure, and her perfect self-control had failed her.

After the day which brought the dead body of Napraxine to his house, and bore him up that beautiful staircase, where his heavy tread and his unlovely presence had so often seemed so unwelcome and so out of place, she had seen no one save those great ecclesiastics and high functionaries who were perforce admitted to her presence. Cards, dispatches, and letters were piled a foot deep in her ante-chamber, but she took no heed of any; her secretary had one formal reply with which he was instructed to receive one and all. Of the thousands who knew her throughout Europe, Othmar alone sent no word and made no sign.

She understood his silence.

She made no affectation of a woe she could not feel or be expected to feel; all the world had known how profound had been her indifference for her husband, and how often intolerant had been her dislike of him. But all that good taste and good breeding could dictate in respect to his memory she did; and she withdrew herself absolutely from the sights and sounds of the world in accordance with the severe usages of his country and with the tragic fate to which he had succumbed. For once her serenity had received a shock which, momentarily at least, affected and dispelled it; for once her languid observation of the ways of life and of death had been quickened to a dual feeling of mingled rejoicing and remorse. The sense of her own liberty

was lovely to her, slight as had been the pressure of the bonds she wore; but her recognition of Platon Napraxine's character had never been so just or so warm as now when his living presence, his physical personality were no longer there to offend her taste and fret her patience. All the dispositions of his testament, all the entire trust they showed in her, all the immense possessions he bequeathed to her, touched her with that consciousness of magnanimity and generosity in this despised nature which had at times visited her during his lifetime, but had always been repulsed. Had it been possible for him to have returned to earth, he would have been as intolerable to her as before; but dead—knowing that never more would he importune or trouble her with his unwelcome tenderness—she remembered him with contrition and almost with remorse. The consciousness that never had she given him even one kind word in return for all his royal gifts and loyal worship hurt her sense of honour; when she remembered that the only praise she had ever accorded to him had only been part of a scene of dissimulation with which she had lulled his just suspicions, all the courage and candour which were natural to her rose up in her conscience and accused her of ingratitude and of treachery. Nor did she shrink from the *meâ culpâ* which her self-reproach exacted. She had never been a coward before her own conscience if her egoism had often made her sleep serenely, deaf to its voice. She did not disguise to herself that she had been neither merciful nor just to the dead man, neither worthy of his unquestioning confidence nor of his unmeasured devotion. She remembered many a time when a kind word would have cost her nothing and would have been so much to him. But, then, if she had spoken it, he would not have understood; he would have presumed on it; he would have imagined that it gave him every privilege; he had always been so stupid; he had never been able to understand *à demi-mot*—there had been no choice but to use the whip and chain to this poor blundering, fawning, loving hound, who would not otherwise comprehend how intolerable were his offered caresses.

Now the 'big dog' was dead and could never more offend.

Perhaps she had been harsh, she thought—sometimes.

In the solitude of the slow-coming chilly spring of the Canton de Vaud, Nadine Napraxine was left alone with her own thoughts. She remained in the strictest seclusion, willing to concede so much to the usages of her nation and the tragedy of his death. The isolation seemed very strange to her, accustomed as she was to have the most brilliant of societies, the most solicitous of courtiers, the most witty of associates, for ever about her. Her life had been always *dans le mouvement*, always seeking, if not always finding, distraction, always filled with the voices and the laughter of the world. In this complete solitude, where only her household were near her and there was no other sound than the

fall of water, the burr of bees, the rush of a distant avalanche falling down the mountain side, or the lilt of a boatman's song echoing from the lake, it seemed to her as if it were she—or all the world—who was dead.

It had been suggested to her that she should have her children there, but she had rejected the idea instantly.

'Now that I am free,' she thought, 'for heaven's sake, let me forget the hours of my captivity if I can.'

They were well cared for; they should always be well cared for; she would never allow their interests to be neglected or their fortunes to be imperilled; but the sons of Platon Napraxine could never be more to her than the issue of a union she had loathed, the living records of a time of intense humiliation and disgust. Her retirement was not nominal; no guests passed her gates except those members of her husband's family and of her own whom it was impossible to refuse to see. Even they could not tell whether she rejoiced or grieved. She was serene and impassible; she never said a syllable which could let any light in upon her own emotions; when she spoke, if it were not with her usual malice, it was with all her usual skill at phrases which revealed her intelligence and hid her heart. She omitted none of the observances which Russian etiquette required from one in her position, and at the long religious services in honour of the dead she was careful to render the respect of her presence, though they meant no more to her than the buzzing of the bees in the laburnum and acacia flowers.

The tedious days passed monotonous and alike.

For the first time in her life she submitted to ennui without revolt; and if in the dewy silent evenings of the early summer she went down to the steps which overlooked the lake, and leaned there, and drew in the breath of the mountain air with a new invigorating sense of freedom from a burden which had for ever galled her, though she had borne it so lightly, no one was offended by that exhilaration, for no one was witness of it; even as no one, either, ever knew how in such evening musings as these an angry cloud would come upon her face and an impatient regret stir at her heart as she thought—why had not Othmar had patience?

She remembered him with a restless and unwilling tenderness.

The knowledge of how his name had escaped her to Ezarhédine was constantly present to her mind, and the recollection fretted and irritated her with all the mortification of a strong pride indignant at its own self-betrayal. Ezarhédine would, no doubt, relate the story of her momentary weakness to her friends and his. She had no belief in the discretion of men; they had their views and principles of honour, no doubt, but she had never known these remain superior to the impulses of their indiscretion or their inquisitiveness; they were always talkative as gossips round a market fountain, curious as children before a case of unpacked toys

CHAPTER XLIX.

WHILST she was thus withdrawn from the world in the observance if not in the regrets of mourning, Othmar left Paris for the seclusion of the château of Amyôt.

The summer and the autumn months seemed to both him and Yseulte long and cruel; all the beauty of Amyôt in the blossoming hours could not make their life there happy to either of them. Since the death of Napraxine a great constraint had come between them. Each of them was sensible of thoughts and of emotions which neither would, or could, confide in the other.

Friederich Othmar came and went between Paris and the great Renaissance château, but he was powerless to alter what he deplored. There was not even any definite thing of which he could speak. There was no fault ever to be found in the gentleness and courtesy of Othmar to his wife; and there was no alteration in the deference and the docility which she always showed to him. Only there was something wanting: there was no spontaneity; there was no sympathy; there was none of that unspoken gladness which exhales from all real happiness as its fragrance from the rose. The wise old man said to himself, impatient and regretful, 'Why did Napraxine die? But for that, time would have been her friend. He would have grown used to her sweet presence, and habit would have brought content. But now!——'

Now, he knew that with every day which dawned, with every night which fell, Othmar brooded, night and day, over his lost future, destroyed by his own rash haste.

All his mind was with Nadine Napraxine, and it fretted him at times almost beyond endurance that he could see her and hear of her no more, know no more of her than all her world knew, or than the chronicles of the hour stated for public information. It seemed to him as it did to her, as if the strangest silence had fallen on the earth. He loved her infinitely more than he had ever done, intense and unscrupulous as had been the passion which she had aroused in him. She was entirely free; and he—he who had adored her—dared not even enter her antechamber or go where he could see her shadow fall upon the ground she trod!

The silence and the self-effacement of Yseulte were the most dangerous anodynes which he could have had. He dreamed his life away in visions of joys which never could be his, and the resignation of his young companion allowed him to dream on unroused.

Friederich Othmar saw his increasing pre-occupation, his growing love of solitude, his impatience when he was recalled by force to the things of actual life, and he could have gnashed his teeth with rage and sorrow.

'He will never live out his years away from his sorceress,' he

thought; 'and when they meet again, she will do what she chooses with him. If she like to make him the ridicule of Europe, he will accept his fate and deem it heaven. Whilst Yseulte—Yseulte—before she is twenty, will be widowed in fact and left to the consolation of some little child, plucking the daisies on the sward here at her feet.'

To Friederich Othmar love had ever seemed the most puerile of delusions, the most illogical of all human fallacies, but now it took a deadlier shape before him, and he began to comprehend why poets—interpreters of human madness as they were—had likened it to the witch's mandrake, to the devouring sea, to the flame which no power can quench, to all things terrible, irresistible, and deadly as death.

Occasionally an impulse came to Yseulte to tell everything to Melville, who was not her confessor, but who had known all her people so well in their days of trial and adversity; but her pride repressed the instinct of confidence. Besides, she thought drearily, she knew well all that Melville would answer—the only reply, indeed, which would be possible to him in such a case—he would exhort her to patience, to hope, to trust in heaven and in her husband. The originality of his character would not be able to escape from the platitudes of custom; he would only say to her what she could say to herself, 'Be courageous and be calm; time often heals all woes.'

Sometimes, too, she thought wistfully that if she bore a living child perhaps she would reach some higher place in her husband's heart.

She had heard it often said that children formed a tie between those who were even indifferent to each other. At least—at least, she reflected, and strove to solace herself with this hope—as the mother of a living child of his, she would be something in his house more than a mere form to wear his jewels and receive his indifferent caresses. Perhaps, she thought, if her eyes looked up at him from his child's face, he might grow to care for her a little. At least she would be something to him that Nadine Napraxine was not. It was a desolate kind of consolation to be the only one within reach of a girl scarce eighteen years old; a sadly forlorn and wistful hope; but it was something to sustain her in the midst of her perfect isolation of thought and suffering, and it prevented her abandonment to despair. She had one of those natures to which tenderness is more natural than passion; her character was of that gentle and serious kind which enables a woman to endure the desertion of her lover if the arms of a child are about her. And so she awaited the future patiently, without much trust in its mercies, yet not without courage and not wholly without hope.

'She looks very ill,' said the most observant of all her friends, Friederich Othmar, more than once to her husband. But Othmar

replied that it was only the state of her health, and the elder man protested in vain.

'You think a girl of those years can be satisfied with bearing your children and being left alone in beautiful houses as a cardinal bird is shut up in a gilded cage?' he said irritably.

'She is certainly not left alone,' replied Othmar with annoyance; 'and I believe that she is precisely of that docile and religious temperament which will find the greatest enjoyment of existence in maternity. There are women formed for that kind of self-sacrifice beyond all others. She is one of them.'

'It is not the only sacrifice to which she is condemned!' muttered Friederich Othmar, but he feared to do more harm than good if he explained himself more clearly.

'Has she been complaining to you?' asked her husband with increasing anger.

'She would never complain,' returned his uncle positively. 'Besides, my dear Otho, whatever we may all think of you, to her you are a demi-god, the incarnation of all mortal and immortal excellences. She would as soon strike the silver Christ that hangs over her bed as consent to see a flaw in your perfections!'

Othmar only replied by an impatient gesture.

Both irritation and self-reproach were aroused in him, but they did no more than disquiet and annoy him. He saw no means by which he could be kinder, or gentler, or more generous, to Yseulte than he was already. Love was not his to command. He could not help it if day by day an unsatisfied passion gnawed in him for an absent woman, and if day by day the fair face of his young wife receded farther and farther from him into the shadowy distance of a complete indifference. All which he could compel himself to render—consideration, deference, kindness, attention—all these he poured out upon Yseulte with the utmost liberality. What was missing was not in his power to give. He felt with a shudder that the longer time went on, the more their lives passed together, the greater would grow the coldness he felt for her. He recognised all her sweetness and grace; he was not ungrateful for the affection she bore him; he admired the many delicate beauties of her mind and character. But she was nothing to him; she never would have the power to quicken his pulses by one second. She was all that purity, honour, and spirituality of thought could make her; but she had no place in his heart. He had even to struggle hard with himself at times not to let the sense of her perpetual presence there become almost an offence to him. He was a generous man, and he had always striven to be just, but he knew that he failed to be just to her because of the fret and fever of his own thoughts, which left him no peace, but kept repeating for ever the same burden: 'The woman you love is free now. O fool! O fool!'

He believed that he altogether concealed what he felt from Yseulte. He did not dream that she had divined his secret. Her manner, which had never been demonstrative, but had been always marked by that mixture of shyness and of stateliness which were most natural to her, was not one which displayed the changes of every emotion; she had been reared in too perpetual a sense that it was both low and coarse to show the inner feelings of the heart by abrupt and transparent signs of emotion, and the calm high breeding of her habitual tone was as a mask, though a most innocent one, and hid alike her sorrow, her fear, her jealous terrors, and her wistful tenderness.

'I must never trouble him,' she said to herself again and again. She knew that she could not take away from him the burden of her life; that she could not release him from the vows he had vowed to her; but she did her uttermost to efface herself otherwise. In these tranquil summer months no one saw more amiss with her than a certain melancholy and lassitude, which were attributed to the state of her health. She was often alone, by choice, in the great gardens and the forest nooks of the park, and those poor little timid verses in which her soul found some kind of utterance were the only confidants of her grief and pain. They were poor things, she knew, but her heart spoke in them with involuntary, though feeble and halting, speech. They did her some little good. She had no mother or friend to whom she could say what she suffered, and from a priest she shrank; her woes—the mental woes of neglected love, the physical woes of approaching parturition—could not be told to any man.

'No one has wanted me all my life!' she thought one day, as she sat in the gardens of Amyôt, whilst her eyes filled with blinding tears. Her father had never heeded her; her grandmother had cared for her, indeed, but had willed her budding life to the cloister, as a thing for which there was no place amidst the love and the laughter of the earth. She had been dependent, undesired, on her cousin's charity, and to her husband she was as little as the does that couched at noon under his forest trees. No one had ever wanted her! The knowledge lay on her young life as a stone lies on the bird which it has killed. Through the hot mist of her tears she gazed wistfully at the long lines of the majestic house which only a year before had been to her the centre of such perfect happiness. And even that happiness he had never shared!

The hush of the golden noon-day was about her, and the perfume of innumerable roses filled the air.

'My little child will want me,' she thought, with a throb of hope at her heart.

After a little while she rose and walked towards the house. Othmar, who had come out from his library on to the terrace, saw her in the distance, and descended the steps to meet her.

'Do not tire yourself, my dear,' he said as he offered her his arm.

His very gentleness almost hurt her more than unkindness or discourtesy would have done. She seemed to see in it how he strove, by all the tenderness of outward ceremonial, to atone for the absence of all tenderness of the heart—to pay so liberally in silver because he had no gold to give.

She had brushed her tears away before she had risen to return to the house; her features were calm, as usual, and if their expression was grave, that was not new with her. She had looked almost as much so on that first night when he had seen her sitting alone in the drawing-rooms of Millo.

As she walked beside him through the aisles of flowers in the sunshine of the brilliant noon-day, she said, with her eyes lowered and her voice very low:

'If—if—I should die this time, would you remember always how much I have felt all your goodness to me? I cannot say all I feel—well—but I hope you would always believe how grateful I had been—when you should think of me at all.'

Othmar was touched and startled by the words.

'My dear child, do not speak so. Pray do not speak so,' he said, with real emotion. 'Send away such cruel thoughts. You must live long, and see your children's children running amidst these roses. You are hardly more than a child yourself in years even yet. And as for gratitude—that is not a word between us; what is mine is yours.'

'I want you to be sure of it—to never doubt it—if I die,' she said, in the same low, measured voice. 'I am always grateful.'

Then she withdrew her hand from his arm, and sat down for a moment on one of the marble seats beneath the great terrace. She looked over the wide sunlit landscape, the radiant gardens, the dark masses of the forests, the green plains and shining river far beyond. Her heart was full; words sprang to her lips, fraught with all the varying emotions of the past months. She longed to cry out to him, 'Ah, yes! You do not love me, I know!—I know! But is there nothing I could do? I would give my life, my soul——'

But timidity and pride both held her mute. The moment passed; he never saw, as he might have seen, into her innocent heart if she had spoken.

The late autumn came, and her child was born as the first red leaves were blown upon the wind. But, enfeebled by the distress of her mind during so many months before its birth, it only breathed a little while the air of earth, then sank into death as a snowdrop sinks faded in the snow. The solace which she had looked to as a staff of comfort and of hope broke in two like a plucked reed.

An intense melancholy closed in upon her, from which no effort could rouse her. She said little; but when she rose from her bed and resumed her daily life, all alone in her heart was the one great grief which had now no hope to lighten it.

They strove to make her remember how young she was, what unspent years yet lay to her account, what undreamed-of treasuries of new happiness were yet untouched by her; but nothing availed to give her any consolation.

The pale sunshine of the early winter found her white and chilled as itself. For she had a deeper pang than ever in her heart since she said ever to herself in her solitary grief: 'He does not care; he is good, he is gentle, he is compassionate; but he does not care.'

All her young life writhed in secret beneath that kindness which was only pitiful, that tenderness which was only conventional.

'I am nothing in his life,' she thought with tenfold bitterness. 'Nothing—nothing—nothing! Even for my child's death he does not really care!'

A woman far away, unseen, almost unheard of, was sole mistress of his existence. With all the terrible insight which a love forsaken and solitary possesses into the secrets of the life to which it clings, she read the thoughts and the emotions of Othmar as though they were written on some open page lit by a strong lamp. Although never a word of self-betrayal escaped him, never more than an involuntary gesture of lassitude or an unconscious sigh, she yet knew how utterly one recollection and one desire alone reigned over him and dominated him. She was no more a child, but was a woman humiliated, wounded, isolated, who suffered far the more because her wounds were not those which she could show, her humiliation was not such as she could reveal, and her isolation was one of the spirit, and not of the body.

'You must not mourn as those who have no hope,' said Melville to her, believing that her continued melancholy was due to the loss of her offspring. 'You are so young; you will have many other children; all kinds of joy will return to you, as their foliage will return to these leafless trees. Be grateful, my dear, to Heaven for all the mercies which abide with you.'

She said nothing; but she turned her eyes on him one moment with an expression so heart-broken and weary that he was startled and alarmed.

'What grief can she have that we know not?' he marvelled. 'Othmar does not leave her; and he is the last man on earth to be cruel or even ungentle to a woman.'

For a moment he was tempted to refer his doubts to her husband; but, on reflection, he dared not. He had a sensitive fear of being deemed meddlesome, as priests so often are called;

and it was difficult to make to Othmar—a very sensitive man, and at all times uncommunicative—so strange an accusation as would seem to lie in saying to him, 'The companion of your life is unhappy: what have you done?'

The winter in the country of the Orléannais grew very cold and damp; the rivers flooded many parts of the plains, and the end of the year menaced violent storms and wide-spread floods. Her physicians begged Yseulte to go elsewhere, and recommended a southern air; they spoke of S. Pharamond, and Othmar, though vaguely reluctant to go thither, consented, for he had no valid reason of refusal to give. To Yseulte herself any movement appeared indifferent; to whatever was proposed she always assented passively; the acquiescence of one whom no trifles or accidents of fate have power to hurt, and which belongs alike to perfect happiness and absolute despair.

Othmar would have given ten years of his life to have been able to go away by himself, to wander north, south, east, or west in solitary desolation, to be alone with his undying desires, and away from the innocent presence of a creature whom he knew that he wronged by every thought with which he rose at day-break and lay down at night.

Yseulte had never been more to him than a sweet and tender-hearted child, whose personal beauties had for a little while beguiled him into the semblance of a faint passion, into a momentary semi-oblivion, always imperfect and evanescent. But now, quiet as she was, and careful as she was never to betray herself, nevertheless a constant reproach seemed to look at him from her eyes, and her continual vicinity seemed as continual a rebuke. He was not a man, as many are, who could lightly neglect or deceive a woman; he was incapable of the half-unconscious cruelty with which many men, when their fancy has passed, leave the object of it in pitiable solitude, to console herself as best she can; he had too much sensitiveness and too much sense of chivalrous obligation to deny, even to his own reflections, the claims which his wife had on him for sympathy and affection. That he could not give them to her, because all his heart and soul and mind were with another woman, burdened him with a perpetual sense of injustice and offence done to her. He had sought her; he had taken her life voluntarily into his; he knew that it would be a treachery and a baseness to fail in his duty towards her. For that very reason her daily presence galled him almost beyond endurance, and, though he forced himself to remain beside her and to preserve to her every outward semblance of regard, his whole life chafed and rebelled, as the horse frets which is tied in stall to its manger, whilst all its longing is for the liberty of the pasture and the air.

If Melville had followed his impulse and said to him, 'What fault can there be in her?' he would have answered truthfully,

'None: all the fault is my own;' and he would have thought in secret: 'She has that involuntary fault which is the cruellest of all others: she is not the woman I love!'

He had to put strong constraint upon himself not to shrink from the sound of her gentle voice, not to avoid the glance of her wistful eyes; he was afraid that she should read the truth of his own utter indifference in his regard; he felt with horror of himself that it was even growing something greater, something worse, than mere indifference; that soon, do what he would, he would be only able to see in her the barrier betwixt himself and the fate he coveted.

'Good God! what miserable creatures we are!' he thought. 'I meant, as honestly as a man could ever mean anything, to make that poor child's days as perfect in happiness as mortal life can be, and all I have actually done is to sacrifice uselessly both her and myself! Heaven send that she may never find it out herself!'

He was far from suspecting that she had already discovered the truth. All the fine prescience, the quickness at reading trivial signs and forming from them far-reaching conclusions, which love lends to the dullest were absent from him, because love itself was absent. Her pride gave her a sure mask, and he had not the lover's impulse which looks for the face beneath.

Their lives outwardly passed in apparent unison and sympathy. He seldom left her save when any urgent matter took him for a brief space to Paris or some other European capital, and the days passed as evenly and unmarked by any event at the château of S. Pharamond as at that of Amyôt. People of a conspicuous position can seldom enjoy solitude, and the demands of society provide them with a refuge from themselves if embarrassment has forced them to need one. Othmar, who had at no time been willing to open the doors of his house to the world, now became almost solicitous to have the world about him. It spared him that *solitude à deux* which, so exquisite to the lover and to the beloved, is so intolerable to the man who knows that he is loved but has no feeling to bestow in answer. Throughout the early winter months they were seldom or never alone. Yseulte said nothing when he urged her to surround herself with people, but obeyed with a sinking heart. She was very proud; she remained tranquil and gentle in manner to him and to everyone, and, if she were at times more pensive than suited her years or her world, it was attributed by all who knew her to the loss of her child. She grew thin and white, and was always very grave; but she had so admirable a courtesy, so patient a smile for all, that not a soul ever dreamed her heart was breaking in her breast.

Sometimes when she was quite alone she wandered up the hillside beneath the olive trees to the bastide of Nicole Sandroz, and sat amidst the blossoming violets, the tufts of hepaticas, with a

strange dull wonder in her at herself. Could it be only two years ago since she had seen Othmar coming in the dusk beneath the silvery boughs and had learned on the morrow that he had asked her hand in marriage?

Nicole watched her wistfully, but she, too, who had lost her *petiot* in the days of her youth, believed that the melancholy which she saw in her darling was due to the death of her offspring. She strove, in ruder words, but in the same sense, to console her as Melville had done. Yseulte smiled gently, thanked her, and said nothing. What was the use, she mused, of their speaking to her of the future? The future, whatever else it brought, would only take the heart and the thoughts of her husband farther and farther from her. She knew still but little of the world, but she knew enough to be conscious that the woman who fails in the early hours of her marriage to make her husband her lover will never in the years to come find him aught except a stranger. All the sensitive hauteur of her nature shrank from the caresses which she knew were only inspired by a sense of pity or of duty. She drew herself more and more coldly away from him, whilst yet the mere sound of his voice in the distance made all her being thrill and tremble. And he was too grateful for the relief to seek to resist her alienation.

He did not guess, because he did not care to guess, that she loved him so intensely that she would stand hidden for hours merely to see him pass through the gardens or ascend the sea stairs of the little quay. Her timidity had always veiled from him the intensity of her affections, and now her pride had drawn a double screen between them.

'He only pitied me then!' she thought, as she sat among the violets at Nicole's flower farm. 'He only pities me now!'

Pity seemed to this daughter of a great race the last of insult, the *obole* thrown to the beggar which brands him as beggar for evermore.

'I was hungered, and he gave me bread; I was homeless, and he sheltered me!' she said, in the agony of her heart. 'And I—I thought that love!'

CHAPTER L.

With the turn of the year and the springing of the crocuses her cousins had come to Millo. When she was in their presence she was more careful than at any other time that no one should see in her any pain which could be construed by them into a reproach against Othmar.

'She grows proud and cold,' said the Duchesse. 'The women of her blood have always been like that—religious and austere.

It is a pity. It will age her before her time; and it is not at all liked in the world nowadays—save just at Lent.'

Blanchette, with her keen mysotis-coloured eyes, saw farther than her mother saw. She did not dare to tease her cousin, or to banter her, but she looked sometimes with curiosity and wonder in her face.

One day, in a softer mood than was usual with her, she came over the gardens from Millo and found her way to her cousin. Blanchette liked to be welcome at S. Pharamond; her shrewd little senses smelt the fragrance in all wealth which dogs finds in the truffle; she was always asking for things and getting them, and though she was afraid of Othmar as far as she could be of anyone, she retained amongst her respect for Yseulte's position her derision for what she termed her romanticism, her Puritanism, and her habitual ignorance of how to extract the honey of self-indulgence from the flowers of pleasure. But Blanchette had all the wisdom of the world in her little fair, curly head, and though at times her malicious impulses conquered her judgment, she usually repressed them out of reverence for the many good gifts which fell to her from her cousin's hands, and those instincts of 'modernity' which forced her to worship where so much riches were.

She came into the garden salon this day, the one where Melville had once said to Othmar that to make a home was in the power of any man not a priest. Her eyes were watchful and her manner important; but Yseulte, to whom the child's presence was always irksome, though her gratitude to their mother forced her always to receive the little sisters with apparent willingness, had not observation enough, or thought enough of her, to notice those signs. She was alone; it was two hours after the noon breakfast; Othmar was away, she knew not where; he had gone out early in the forenoon. She was lost in the weariness of those thoughts which occupied her unceasingly, when the pretty gay figure of the child tripped up to her side, and the thin high voice of her began its endless chatter.

'They were talking about you yesterday after the *déjeuner*,' she said, after her discursive gossip had embraced every subject and person then of interest to her, pecking at each one of them furtively, petulantly, as a well-fed mouse pecks at crumbs of cake. 'They were saying how beautiful you were; even mamma said that, and they all agreed that if only you were not so grave, so cold, so almost stiff, nobody would be admired more than you. But men think you do not care, so they do not care. It is true,' added Blanchette, studying the face of her cousin out of the corner of her eye, 'it is true that the Princess Napraxine, whom they are always so mad about, is just as indifferent too. But then it is another kind of indifference—hers. She is always provoking them with it, on purpose. You go through a room as if you were

saying a paternoster under your breath. It is a great difference——'

'It is, no doubt, a great difference,' said Yseulte, with more bitterness than she was aware of; the idle words struck at the hidden wound within her. The difference was vast, indeed, between herself and the woman whom her husband loved!

Blanchette watched her sharply, herself sitting on a stool at her feet.

'Do you know,' she said, pulling the ears of Yseulte's great dog, 'that she is coming—indeed, I think, is here? I heard them say so yesterday. It seems that the Prince bought that little villa and gave it to her—La Jacquemerille—when they were here two years ago. She is very rich, you know. Her husband has left her such immense properties, and then I think she had a great deal of money all of her own, before his death, from some distant relative, who left it to her because she did not want it; it is always like that.'

Yseulte rose abruptly. Blanchette could not see her face, but she saw her left hand, which trembled.

As far as the child liked anyone, she was attached to her cousin; since her marriage Yseulte had been extremely generous and kind to her, and the selfish little heart of Blanchette had been won, as far as ever it could be won, by its affections which were only another form of selfishness. She had been unable to resist the temptation of telling her news, and saying what was unkind; and yet in her way she was compassionate.

'Why are you so very still and grave?' she said now after a pause. 'They say it is because the child died, but that cannot be it; it is nonsense; you would not care like *that*. Do you know now what I think? Do not be angry. I think that you are so unhappy because—because—now Prince Napraxine is dead, you fancy that she would have been his wife if you had not been here!'

'Silence!' said Yseulte, with imperative command. Her face grew scarlet under the inquisitive, searching gaze of the child. She suffered an intolerable humiliation beneath that impertinent and unerring examination which darted straight into her carefully-treasured secret, and dragged it out into the light of day.

'Ah!' said Blanchette, with what was, for her, almost regret, and almost sympathy, 'ah, I was sure of it! I have always been sorry that I said anything to you that day. But why do you care? If I were you, I should not care. What does it matter what he wishes? Men always wish for what they cannot get; I have heard that said a hundred and a thousand times. And you are his wife, and you have all the houses, and all the jewels, and all the horses, and all the millions; and as he is always thinking of her, so people say, he will not mind what you do.

You may amuse yourself just as you like. If I were you, I should go and play at the tables.'

'Silence! You are insolent; you hurt me; you offend me,' said Yseulte, with greater passion than she had ever yielded to in all her life. All the coarse consolations which the world would have given her, repeated and exaggerated on the worldly-wise lips of Blanchette, seemed to her the most horrible parody of her own sacred and intolerable woe, so carefully buried, as she thought, from any human eye.

'It is true,' said the child, offended and sullen. 'Everyone knew he never loved you; he always loved her. Even in Paris last year——. But what does it matter? You have got everything you can want——'

But Yseulte had left her standing alone in the golden-coloured drawing-room of S. Pharamond, with the irises and roses so gaily broidered on the panels of plush.

Blanchette shrugged her shoulders as she glanced round the room. 'What idiots are these sensitives!' she thought, with wondering contempt. 'What can it matter? She has all the millions——'

The mind of the little daughter of the latter half of the nineteenth century could go no further than that.

She had all the millions!

She had meant, quite sincerely, to give sympathy and consolation, but she could not help fashioning both in her own likeness.

Yseulte, with a feverish instinct to reach solitude and the open air, left her tormentor within the house, and hastily covering herself, passed out into the gardens of S. Pharamond, and walked farther and faster than her physical strength, which had not been great since the birth of her child, was well fitted to bear. She longed thirstily for the grey skies and the moist air of Faïel, for the cold dusky seas of the north-west, and the dim far-stretching lands. The light, the buoyancy, the glitter, the dry clear atmosphere of those southern shores, oppressed her and fevered her. If she had not altogether lost the habit of confidence in her husband, she would have said to him, 'I sicken of all this drought and cloying sweetness. Let me go where the west wind blows; where the northern billows roll; where it is cold, and dusk, and green, and full of shadows; where it does not mock one's pain with light and laughter!'

But she had lost that habit utterly; she never spoke of anything she felt or wished; she accepted all the days of her life as they came to her.

'I have nothing of my own,' she thought; 'I have no right to wish for anything.'

He had made this place hers; he always spoke of it as hers; it was, indeed, her own inalienably; but she did not feel it to be so. It was only a part of his wide charity to her—the charity which she had thought was love.

She walked far, she scarcely knew herself where, taking her way mechanically through the grounds and into the fields and orange woods adjoining them, following the windings of the paths which wound upward between the great gnarled trunks of olives and beneath their hoary branches. As she ascended under the forest of olives, which was part of the lands of S. Pharamond, she could see below her a broad hunting-road, cut in old times by the Maison de Savoie, neglected by the Commune, but kept in preservation by Othmar himself. She heard a sound of horses' hoofs, and instinctively looked down; between the network of olive boughs she saw a low carriage, drawn by three black ponies abreast, and harnessed in the Russian manner, their abundant manes streaming on the wind as they dashed headlong down the steep incline. They were followed by two outriders in liveries of deep mourning.

The woman who drove them looked upward, and made a slight salutation with a smile.

It was Nadine Napraxine.

In another instant the turn of the road hid them from sight, and the beat of the galloping hoofs was lost in the sound of a little torrent which fell down through the red bare rocks above, and fed with its moisture the beds of violets beneath the olives.

CHAPTER LI.

THAT night there was a concert at Millo. It was the fifth week of Lent: nothing was possible but a musical party. There were famous musicians and equally famous singers; the gardens were illumined, and the whole arrangements had that charm and novelty which Madame de Vannes knew so well how to give to all she did. But the evening was chiefly noticeable for the first appearance in the world, since her husband's death, of the Princess Napraxine. She came late, as she always came everywhere; she still wore black; there was no relief to it anywhere, except that given by the dazzling whiteness of her great pearls and of her beautiful skin. The contour of her throat and bosom, the exceeding beauty of her arms, had never been seen in such marked perfection as in that contrast with the sombre robe she wore, sleeveless, and fastened on each shoulder only with a clasp of pearls. One unanimous chorus of admiration ran from mouth to mouth as she entered.

The tragedy of her husband's death had left no trace on her. Her smile had its old ironical insouciance, her lips their rich, warm rose-colour, her eyes their lustrous languor; abstinence from all the fatigues of society, and the fresh air of the country life in which she had passed the tedious months of her seclusion, had

given her all the vivifying forces of health without destroying that look of fragility and languor which were her most potent charms.

'Poor Napraxine!' thought Melville as he looked at her; but he was the only one there who remembered the dead man.

Neither Othmar nor his wife was present there that night.

Both feared, with a fear which lay mute at the heart of each, to see again for the first time before the eyes of the world the woman whose memory ruled his life.

CHAPTER LII.

When Nadine Napraxine returned home that night she found a letter lying on the table, of whose superscription she recognised the writing.

'So soon!' she thought, with her little smile, which had always been so calm and so amused before the madnesses of men.

But when she had read it, it seemed like a living, burning palpitating thing, so did its words throb and thrill with ardour, reproach, and pain. All the suffering and passion pent up in his soul for twelve long months had broken loose and were uttered in it.

He had written in the silence of the dawn, when all the world was quiet as the grave, and the loud beating of his heart was audible to his own ear as he realised that near him, beyond those few miles of feathery foliage and flower-scented fields, there lay sleeping the one woman he adored. The impulse to write so to her had been stronger than himself, and all wisdom, manhood, and pride spoke to him in vain. To her alone had he ever laid bare his heart; to her alone was he not ashamed to uncover all its weakness, all its rebellion, all its futile and feverish pain. Let her laugh if she would, he thought, but let her know all he suffered through her. For a year he had kept silent; chained down by the bonds of duty and of custom. For a year he had lived out his dreary days as best he might, bearing his burden mutely, and striving to do his best: but at the knowledge that she was near him, there in the pale, cool air of the daybreak, all his efforts at self-command were shattered as silk threads break in a nervous hand.

No one had ever written to her as he wrote now.

She read the letter, with the rosy light of the morning coming in through her half-closed shutters; and the words of it banished the sleep which hung like vapour about her languid eyes and her dreamy thoughts. The smile went away from her lips. The force of another human heart smote for once an echo from hers.

'What madness!' she murmured.

But it was a madness which seemed noble to her, beautiful in its folly, and even in its torture; she felt a strange emotion as she read and re-read the only message which he had sent to her in the whole months of a year. She sat lost in thought; hesitation was rare with her, but now she hesitated. With a word she could banish him for ever from her life. With a word she could call him for ever to her side. His face seemed to rise before her as she looked at the signature of his name; his voice seemed in her ear pleading, imperious, tender, as she had heard it a hundred times. A year had been lost; a year had passed and dropped in the past, and they had never looked upon each other's faces. A certain emotion which she had never known stirred in her—the weakness of a sudden yearning, of a sudden wistful desire.

'Is this love too?' she thought, with that ironical doubt of herself with which she had so often doubted others.

'I have never cared,' she thought, with scorn for the impulses which had moved her. But she cared now. The silence and the absence of those long months had been his friends. In her meditations she had confessed to herself that he had not been to her the mere poor slave and spaniel that other men had been; she had thought to herself more than once with a wonder at her own regret: 'If he had only had patience! If he had only waited!'

She read the letter he had written twice again. Then she burned it. She did not need to keep it. Each word of it was written on her memory. When the day was warm with the light of the forenoon's sunshine she went out into the air. She felt the need of movement, of space, of a fresh atmosphere. For the first time in her life a certain excitation had taken the place of her tranquil serenity. A certain restlessness had disturbed her indifference; she had the sense of having descended to some too great concession, of having let herself fall from her serene heights of power to some human feebleness and frailty.

'If this be love?' she mused again with doubt and disdain, casting on the awakening warmth of her own feelings that ice of scepticism with which she had so often frozen the hearts of others. 'If I were only quite sure of what I feel,' she thought, with that egoism which was so natural to her that it was part of her every impulse and of her every motive.

Life had a certain loveliness for her in her perfect liberty, though she still doubted whether its monotony would not mar even that. The sense of her entire freedom was still welcome to her, and the world awaited her as a courtier, hat in hand, awaits his queen. All its pleasures—such as they were, she knew them all, and held them in slight esteem—would be hers. She had youth, beauty, and wit; and, when the first two of these should have left her, would still have that power of great riches which, as a wise man has said, is the only one to which the modern world will bow. And yet a vague melancholy was upon her; that

melancholy, like a light mist on a smiling landscape, which she had once said might have made her such a poet as Maikoff had she lived for ever in the solitude of the steppes.

She went out into the balmy air, clear as crystal, and filled with the scent of blossoming orange-boughs. She stood awhile on the marble terrace and looked seaward. The memories of the dead men who so late had been living there beside her passed over her in the warmth and light of the morning with a chill, as the north wind will sweep through the sunshine and scatter the clusters of orange-buds. Of them all, it was of her husband that she thought with the nearest likeness to self-reproach which her nature made possible.

'He was brave, he was as trustful as a dog, he was *bon enfant*,' she mused, 'and I do not think I ever said to him a single kind word before that last day—and then it was only said to deceive him!'

She remembered him as he had spoken to her on that day. He had had a certain dignity, the dignity of manliness, of simplicity, of truthfulness; and all that was left of him was lying, mere dry dust and bones, in his emblazoned coffin in the gilded gloom of the church at Zaraizoff.

'Well—the dead are dead, and we shall soon be with them,' she thought with a sigh, as she turned from the sea wall of the terrace and looked at the picturesque and irregular front of the house, covered with its gay garlands of creeping plants.

The place was hers, bought for her by Napraxine, as one may buy a bonbon-box for a child. It seemed that day to laugh with light and colour. Coming hither as she did from the endless night of a Russian winter, it seemed bathed in heat, and luminance, and flowers. She descended the steps to where her ponies waited, and went with them along the climbing roads into the hills above La Jacquemerille.

The day was still young. The bare mountain sides wore the hues of the jacinth and amethyst; the odours of sweet herbs and spring flowers were strong and sweet; far down below, unseen, the sea was sparkling, lending the sense of its presence and its freedom to all the gorges and hillsides above. Her swift-footed ponies bore her fleetly as the Hours bore Aurora through the roseate and golden radiance of the April morning.

With intention she guided them up the steep roads which led to the humble church of S. Pharamond, hidden beneath its great gnarled olive trees, and covered with its network of rose-boughs. She knew that Yseulte went there often in the forenoon and the caprice moved her to see if she could meet, as if by chance, this poor child, whose fate lay in the hollow of her hand, like a bird taken from a trap to be strangled with a touch at pleasure of its keeper. The sense of such power was always sweet to her, although so familiar, its familiarity did not detract from its

pleasure. It was the sole thing which did not by repetition grow monotonous. Her life had been short by years, but it had been full of such dominion. She had dealt with men and women as she chose, and to make or mar their destinies had always been the sole pastime of which she did not weary. Humanity was her box of puppets, as it is that of the Solitary of Varzin. To hold the strings of fate, to bind and loose the threads of circumstance, and weave the warp and woof of destiny, was the only science which had ever had charm over her changeful temperament and her sceptical intelligence. Beside it all other things were trivial and tame. She had never met anyone who had resisted her will; Othmar himself had done so for awhile, but he had lived to repent and to succumb.

The church of S. Pharamond was empty and silent; there was no office said that day; it was grey and still and mournful, and no living thing was in it save a swallow perched upon the altar rail. She pursued the steep hillside road, overhung with olive and fig trees, the wayside carpeted with gladiolus and the blue fleur-de-luce. Below, through the light green foam of spring foliage and the sombre masses of pine and ilex woods, there rose the towers and pinnacles of the château, rising slim and fantastic, against the azure of the sky. Around her the silence was unbroken, except by a tethered goat cropping euphorbia and ivy from a ruined wall.

Looking through the boughs of the olives, she saw afar off the figure of Yseulte. Where she was standing was on the land of Nicole Sandroz, the furrows, thick with flowers, climbing the hill slope, the orchard of lemon and olive hiding the low white walls of the house. She alighted, and left her little horses standing by a stone well made in the old wall where the goat was tethered. She wished to see the wife of Othmar, and she moved straight towards her where she sat beneath one of the gigantic olives, whose foliage spread in a misty cloud silvery and sea-green above her. She had uncovered her head in the deep shadow around her; her attitude was listless, spiritless, dejected; in the shade thrown from the olive boughs her face looked very colourless, worn, and thin. All her look of childhood had passed away, and almost all her youth as well. As she recognised her rival she trembled violently and rose to her feet, losing for the moment all self-control and presence of mind. Her large brown eyes dilated with fear, like a deer's when it is hard pressed in the chase. She had scarcely self-command to make the common gesture of salutation.

Nadine Napraxine, smiling, approached her and looked at her with that critical and penetrating glance which, through its languor, could read all the secrets of the soul. She spoke the bland commonplaces of compliment and courtesy with her sweetest manner, her most gracious grace; and the girl, paralysed once again, as a hundred times before, murmured a stupid sentence or

so, coloured, grew pale, hesitated, felt herself awkward, foolish, and constrained, and could not keep down the tremor which shook her from head to foot, thus suddenly confronted with the woman whom her husband loved. All the terror which she had felt in Paris returned to her with tenfold more suffering, tenfold more intensity. In the morning light, standing amongst the simple wild herbs and flowers, her foe had the same magical power of magnetism over her as she had had in the lighted drawing-rooms and theatres of Paris. She understood why she herself was nothing in her husband's life, and this other was all.

With simple gracious words, as she might have spoken to a timid child, her enemy continued to address her, passing over her constraint and silence as though she perceived them not, and all the while that the smooth, careless phrases rose so easily on her lips she studied the changing colour and the frightened eyes of Yseulte with that amused and merciless analysis which was so common to her. She understood how all the whole being of her victim shrank from her as a bird shrinks from the gaze of a snake, yet how her courage and her pride strove with her emotion and vainly tried to hide her fear.

'Oh, foolish, foolish child!' she thought, from the height of her own assured strength, her own irresistible power: 'if you mistrust yourself, you lie at the mercy of all your foes. Do you not know that the first necessity for all success is to believe in our own power to attain it? Nature has given you personal loveliness, but the gift is of no more use to you than a score of music in the hands of an ignorant who cannot read it, than a sculptor's chisel in the fingers of a child. You love Othmar, and you weep for him; and you know how to do nothing more. Do you suppose that women govern men with tears? Do you suppose that their desires wake because a woman prays?'

There was derision, but there was a not unkind pity in her, as her eyes studied the face in which, despite its youth and delicacy and charm, Othmar could see no beauty.

'Your child died?' she said suddenly, as she sat there beside her unwilling and trembling captive. Yseulte bent her head; she could not trust her voice to answer.

'Did you care so much?' said Nadine Napraxine in wonder.

'I wished that it had been myself.'

The words escaped her almost unawares. When they had been uttered she longed to recall them. They would sound, she knew, like a confession of sorrow to the ear of one to whom all the sorrow of her life was due.

'Are you not happy, then, my dear?' said Nadine Napraxine: her tone was grave and soft, and had for once no mockery or innuendo in it.

Yseulte grew paler even than she had been before; a frown of anger knitted her fair brow; her expression grew cold and hard.

'I think you have no right to ask me that,' she said, gathering with effort courage enough to oppose her dreaded foe. 'I think you have no right. You are my husband's friend, not mine.'

Nadine Napraxine smiled.

'The frightened doe has its own bravery when roused,' she mused; and aloud she only said, with all the sweet suave courtesy of her very gentlest manner:

'His friend and yours. Surely that is the same thing? Or if it be not, you should be wise and make it so.'

She paused a moment, then added softly still:

'Happiness only comes to the wise, my dear; it does not come to those who stake their all upon one cast like the mad gamblers in the *salle de jeu* behind those hills. But you are too young to understand; and if I spoke to you all day I should not teach you my philosophies.'

'I do not wish to learn them.'

She spoke almost sullenly, almost rudely, as the natural courage of her temper asserted itself and strove to struggle against the paralysis of mesmerised fear in which the presence of her rival held her.

'They have been useful,' said Nadine Napraxine with a chillier intonation. 'And for want of them, what have women—who can only love—made of their lives, and of their lovers? But since you will not allow that I am your friend, I will leave you to your sylvan solitudes. Adieu, my dear. It is not in the woods and hills that you will learn to recover that *secret de bonheur* which you have lost so early.'

She lingered a moment, looking at Yseulte with her meditative, languid, unrevealing gaze. The girl's lips trembled, her throat swelled, her eyes filled with scorching tears; she turned abruptly away lest her self-control should altogether fail her. She knew that she had betrayed herself as utterly to her enemy's eyes as though she had poured out in words all the piteous secrets of her aching heart. Nadine Napraxine passed slowly beneath the olive branches, brushing the humble flowers with her careless sovereign's step.

'She is foolish, she is simple, she is awkward, and she is most unwise,' she thought. 'But she is brave——'

It was the quality which she always honoured.

CHAPTER LIII.

WHEN she returned home, she shut herself in her own rooms, and was not seen, even by her women, for three hours. She lay almost immovable upon a couch, whilst the sunshine came tempered and rose-hued through the lowered awnings of her windows, and the air around her was filled with the scent of hundreds of cut

roses placed in all the jars and bowls and vases in her sight. For the first time in her life a doubt which came from pity, and a hesitation which came from conscience, were at war with all her habits, instincts, and vanities. Underneath her egoism, and her cruelty, and her many ironies, there had always been latent a disdainful honour. Once having given it, she would have kept her word to the meanest creature; she would have taken no advantage of the weakest enemy, if to do so had been an injustice. She was capricious in every act of her life, but her caprices had no meanness in them; she was supremely merciless, because she was supremely indifferent, but she was capable of perfect loyalty in her own fashion. Far down in the depths of her complex nature there was, beneath all the coldness, malice and selfishness of disposition and of custom, a vague instinct of chivalrous generosity. If ever that chord in her were touched, it always responded. When she had been a child, reading the old chronicles in her father's library, her favourite of history had always been John of France, for sake of that voluntary return to his captivity in England.

She comprehended the delirious impulse on which Othmar, hearing that she was near him after twelve months of absence, had been unable to control the emotion which mastered him, and had, in an hour of irresponsible passion, laid his soul bare before her, in all its weakness, and offered to load it with any weight she chose, so that only he could be once more admitted to her presence. And she knew, even more surely than he did, because she was calmer than he was, all which hung upon her own decision. She knew that, once entering there, he would be then and for ever hers; never more his wife's. She was too clear of sight to cheat herself with self-delusions. Othmar would be faithful to her, and false to all else all his life through, if once she wrote to him the simple word he asked for: 'Come.' She knew that he had played with fire unharmed, only because she herself had been cold as ice; but now her coldness seemed suddenly to melt within her, and her heart to go out to him in sweet and sudden yearning.

If he came there he would come as her lover.

To all her newly awakening tenderness, and to all her habitual instincts of supremacy, the temptation was strong. For once in her life she realised something of the force of that irresistible and enervating impulse which heretofore had always seemed to her a mere frenzy of ungoverned senses, of disordered dreams. For once her life seemed incomplete if lived on without his.

Her irony and raillery could not aid her against herself; she was absorbed in, and invaded by a tide of new and warm emotion; the words which he had written to her seemed burned into her mind—seemed to fill the rose-scented air, and become audible, as though his voice were pleading to her.

'If this be love?' she thought again, with astonished impatience, with a sense of servitude and weakness.

Twice she rose to write the one word he asked; and twice she put the pen aside with it unwritten.

Such vacillation was new to her, and hateful as a sign of feebleness. Her caprices had been as changeful as the winds of April, but beneath them her will had been always firm as a rod of steel, centred ever on her own whim and pleasure. Now she was irresolute, and scarce knew what she wished, or what she chose.

She who had the blood in her of lascivious empresses, and of fierce murderers of men, was swayed by two unfamiliar and divided things—by conscience, and compassion. The tide of freshly-roused emotions, which would have swept her onward to the gratification of them without thought or pause, was checked by a sentiment as rare—the sentiment of mercy. Once, one of her people, in the dark days of Natalia Narischkine's rule, being of those who slew in the name of the idiot, Ivan, had slaughtered the Narischkine right and left, not pausing for age or youth or sex, but, coming to the place where a young child of the hated race lay sleeping, had dropped his blood-red sword in shame, as before some holy image, faltered, and turned away; the child had slept on unharmed. Such hesitation as that was with her now, born out of the very faults of her nature, out of her disdain, of her hauteur, of her superb self-love.

She was conscious of a desire to be in the presence of Othmar, to hear his voice, to see his face again; a desire enervating, vague, full of a dangerous languor, and a dangerous warmth; beyond that, stimulating and sustaining it, were the instincts of empire, of dominion, of a capricious and ever-victorious volition. Never in all her life had she resisted an impulse of self-indulgence, had she hesitated before any sacrifice of others. Absence had increased the shadowy attraction which had always drawn her towards this one amongst her many lovers; in the long silent months of her solitude his memory had grown dearer and more welcome with each day. And he was hers, if she chose.

At her command all honour, duty and allegiance would be mere empty words on his ear, without power to hold him, or meaning to move him. Dignity, self-respect, and loyalty to his self-chosen vows would become no more to him than threads of silk upon the neck of a courser broke loose. She had only to let him enter there, and the world would hold nothing for him but herself.

And for once she might perchance be able to share that oblivion, to comprehend that ecstasy; and yet she hesitated, because a new faint sense of pity and of compassion had come upon her.

'After all,' she thought, 'I should probably care such a little while, and she, poor child—it is all her life!'

A disdainful compassion forbade her to strike down so weak a foe. Opposition or conflict would have intensified all her imperious resolve, and heightened the zest of her power of destruction;

but the helplessness, the feebleness of her rival disarmed her. It would be like striking a nesting-bird, a wounded kid.

Nadine Napraxine thought of her with a sensation of pity and the stronger sensation of disdain which was inevitable to her character. A creature who could not conquer, could not resist, could not keep hold upon her own, seemed a thing so foolish and so feeble to her! Even in her solitude, her imperial supremacy made her lips smile contemptuously, her eyes gleam with scorn, as she rose and paced her chamber for a few moments, her head erect and her bosom risen high with her proud thoughts.

All the superb courage and scorn which were much stronger in her than any other emotion, rejected so easy a victory, so sure a triumph.

'She is so impotent, poor little fool!' she murmured. 'She will break her heart for ever in vain; she will never touch his.'

Her rooms were filled with the sweet faint smell of the roses, and heated to the heat of a midsummer noon. She sat still in the dreamy warmth, and all her vague regrets oppressed her with a faint, heavy sense of inclinations suppressed, and impulses awaking after long torpor.

'I should not hesitate at a crime,' she thought, 'but this would be almost a baseness.'

And her memory went once more back to the hour in which the dead body of Napraxine had been before her sight, the tea-rose held close in his stiffened hand, and darkly red with the blood of his lungs.

'If he were living!' she thought.

If he had been living, he could have avenged Yseulte and himself.

But he was dead, a thing of bones and ashes—powerless, senseless, defenceless. Something in that dishonour which would be done to a dead man and to a helpless child seemed to her courage cowardice, to her generosity meanness, to her dignity unworthiness.

'Neither could ever hurt us,' she thought, 'neither could ever avenge it on us.'

Her sense of the utter impotency of those two, when she remembered it, disarmed her where opposition or the struggle of forces equal to her own would have made her obstinate and pitiless. They were so helpless!—the girl in her pathetic, ignorant, unloved humiliation and ineptitude; the man, dead in his strength, who had left only a memory behind him. It would be as easy to sweep the one out of her path as to forget and deride the other: so easy that it seemed not worth the while; so easy that it seemed almost base.

She would have used her blade of steel without mercy to cleave through bone and flesh of any who should have ventured to oppose

her; but to cut down a garden lily already dying of drought, to strike a pale shadow from the tomb—it seemed poor, unworthy.

Othmar was hers if she would.

Had there been any doubt of it, her nature would have urged her on in unsparing resolution until he should have yielded. But he was hers when she chose, body and soul, peace and honour, present and future. Her perfect sense of empire and security of dominion left her serene and gentle; she could listen to the voice of pity, the impulse of what men, in their stupidity, called conscience. It was with the disdainful generosity with which the Great Katherine might have loosed one of her lovers from the chains which bound him to her throne, that she renounced her power to take him from his wife.

'If it were only a crime,' she thought, in the mystical complex subtleties and intricacies of her brain, 'if it were only a crime, the darkness would heighten the dawn, the danger would sweeten the pleasure, the courage of it would strengthen the self-indulgence; but when it is mean, when one is sure that there is no one living who can avenge it, only a poor meek fool who will weep——!'

The laws of so-called duty said nothing to her.

The morality of the world was in her sight a mere mass of affectation, hypocrisies, and timorous shifts.

To her sated and ever-curious intelligence a crime might have had some potent charm, because it would have possessed some novelty and proffered some strange experience.

But a meanness revolted her with the same sense of disgust as would have moved her before squalor or disease. The same impulse which moves the white-plumaged bird to keep aloof from dust or mud, moved her to recoil from what was base or was ungenerous.

She rose and approached one of the windows, and pushed the rose-coloured blind aside, and looked out over the wide white marble terrace and the blue silent sea beyond.

It was three in the afternoon.

He had waited ten hours for her answer.

She left the casement and sat down and wrote. She wrote rapidly, as her wont was; and when she had written, folded and sealed her letter rapidly, giving it no second glance or afterthought. Then she rang, and bade her women send her the African boy, Mahmoud. When he obeyed her summons, she gave him a letter:

'Take that to the château of S. Pharamond,' she said to him. 'You know Count Othmar. Wait until you can see him alone, and give it, when he is alone, into his own hands. You understand me.

Mahmoud prostrated himself, put the letter in his vest, stretched himself again on the ground in obeisance, then silently left her presence.

She had always found the child obedient and intelligent, the only person in all her household who would obey implicitly and in silence, without feeling any curiosity as to the purport of his errands or ever babbling of them in the servants' hall.

When he had left her she remained long motionless, lost in thought, sitting alone amidst the dying roses, and the sunbeams broken and dimmed by the deep shadows from the veiled windows. She had a strange desolate sense of having given up the only thing which could have made life worth the living.

'But I think in what I wrote there was no suggestion of regret,' she mused, recalling all her written words. 'I think not; I hope not. If he believed that there were any regret on my side, it would be of no avail to have written it. He would be here in an hour, and he would follow me all the world over.'

Then she summoned her women again:

'I go back to Russia to-night, to Zaraizoff,' she said to them. 'Tell Paul to have everything done that is necessary.'

CHAPTER LIV.

THE boy Mahmoud, with the letter in his vest, took his way by the inland paths towards S. Pharamond; it was not more than three miles, following the tracks the peasants used. Mahmoud was almost always dumb, but he was ceaselessly watchful; he adored his mistress, but he was morbidly jealous of her. In the gay households of La Jacquemerille, of Zaraizoff, of the Hôtel Napraxine, his precocity had become familiar with all the corruptions of the world of white faces. Speaking little he was supposed to understand as little; but, in truth, the small listening dusky boy understood every word which went past him. He had heard them in Paris speak of Othmar; he had comprehended that Othmar was the lover of his mistress; he had heard Paul say to his friends, 'If it have ever been anyone, it is that one.' He had understood, and he had taken a hatred of Othmar into his silent, savage, volcanic child's heart.

When Mahmoud had been very ill with the cruel north winds which blew so bitterly on his lungs, made only to breathe the torrid air of the Soudan, his lady had come to see him, had spoken sweet words to him in his own tongue, had touched his dusky paw with her soft snowy hand. Mahmoud would have died a hundred deaths for her if he had had the chance; but he was jealous, like a little black sulking dachshund, of the mistress who sheltered him. Whenever he walked behind her, bearing her shawls or her sunshade, he could have kissed her shadow as it fell, but he could have plunged his dagger into the throats of the great gentlemen who sauntered by her side. He was furiously, blindly

jealous, with the jealousy of a child and of a little wild beast blent in one. To his naturally evil passions the life of Paris had united a monkeyish malice and a precocious comprehension of vice. As he went now under the red blossoms of the pepper trees and the yellow flowers of the mimosas which fringed the route, a devilish fancy came into his head.

If, instead of giving the letter which he bore to Othmar, he took it to Othmar's wife? His faculties had been educated enough in all the scandals and jests of Paris to surmise that so he might bring about with impunity a complication not easy to unravel, a storm not easy to allay. If his mistake were ever brought against him, it would seem only a mistake; he would take refuge behind his stolid childish mask of affected stupidity, which had served him well more than once. He had the cunning of the African, and he knew that the first condition for his own safety in effecting such a treason would be that no one should observe him on his errand. He entered the grounds of the château cautiously. The gates usually stood open in the daytime, and the boy's gaily-clad figure glided in amongst the shrubs unperceived.

It was about five o'clock in the afternoon. Yseulte was seated out of doors, in a part of the gardens which was not in sight of the house. There was a large Judas tree there covered with its crimson blossoms; beneath it were some rustic chairs. She was reading, or affecting to read; the book was open on her lap. The crimson flowers every now and then, shaken by a south wind, fell down upon the unturned page.

Mahmoud had crept noiselessly about amongst the trees and plants, until he saw her, with that feline skill and silence which were natural to him, and had been developed by his life in the households of the Napraxines. He knew her well by sight; he had seen her constantly in Paris. He knew nothing of her otherwise, but he was French enough by education to be sure that for her to receive and read a letter addressed to her husband would bring about some dire disturbance.

So he approached her, bowing low as he had been taught to do, and tendered the letter to her:

'From Madame la Princesse Napraxine,' he said, repeating his salaam.

Yseulte took the letter with a strange tumult at her heart: she did not look at the superscription; she broke open the envelope with agitation and haste. It might be only a conventional sentence or two, an invitation or a farewell, or it might be some message of greater meaning. It seemed strange to her that Nadine Napraxine should address even the most formal words to her. She sat down under the boughs of the roseate Judas tree and read what was written, read it with all that instantaneous comprehension which comes to the brain in moments of intense excitement.

There were but a few sentences in all in it, but those had been written to Othmar, not to herself:

'I have read your letter. I believe all that is said in it. I doubt most things, but I have never doubted your love for me. If there be any consolation to you in knowing this, you may believe it to the full. I am certain that you would do all you say if I would accept the gift of your life. But I will not; for it is not yours to give, and I do not rob the innocent. My dear Othmar, I have seen your wife a few hours ago; I sought her, she did not seek me; and from my soul I pity her, though I am not too easily moved to pity. I pity her because she loves you so greatly, and yet in your life she counts for nothing. She would die for you, yet she will never be able to quicken a single beat of your pulse. The fault is not hers—you admitted that the last evening I spoke to you in Paris—but she only irritates when she would please you, she only wearies you when she should stimulate you. You will never care for her; she is a young angel, yet she will go unloved by you all her life. But if you cannot do more, you can spare her some pain, some dishonour; and I desire you to spare her that. Yours is the fault that she is now beside you; you were in haste and blind, and adventured a rash experiment; but it would be ungenerous in us both if we made her pay all the penalty of my indifference and your error. You have a strange madness for me because I am far removed from you; but I—who am not mad—I can see that honour says to you, and generosity says to me the same thing. I do not use the stale word duty, because neither you nor I believe much in it; but honour and generosity call upon us to protect a child who cannot protect herself, and perhaps even a little also to remember a dead man who cannot avenge himself. I do not speak to you as moralists would speak; I only mean that you must remember those obligations which, as they were taken up unasked, must be fulfilled out of sheer sense of common honour. You cannot force yourself to care for her, but you can force yourself to conceal from her that you do not. She is one of those women who easily and willingly believe. For myself, I would sooner hesitate to dishonour a dead man than a living one; so, I think, would you, if you only pause and think of it. If I listened to you now when I have repulsed you before, it would always seem to me as if I had not been brave enough whilst he was living, whilst he could have killed me or you, or done anything he chose. This is mere sentimental superstition, no doubt, but so it is with me. We will not meet again, not yet, at least. You will not be happy, of course, nor will you love your wife: neither happiness nor love is to be had at command. But you are just by nature; be just now; do not let all the weight of a mistake, which was wholly of your own seeking and making, lie upon a creature altogether innocent. She is not wise as we are

wise, but she has a beautiful nature; she is purity itself; be grateful. I do not say forget me, for that you will not do; but live so that I may admire you and not esteem you a coward. We have both always lived for ourselves, let us endeavour for a change to live a little for others.'

The letter was signed in full 'Nadège Fedorowna Princess Napraxine.'

Yseulte had read it once unconsciously, all its words seeming to smite her brain together like the blows of many hands upon an unresisting creature. She read it once again consciously, deliberately, word for word; then she rose and put it out towards the bearer of it:

'It is not mine,' she said, in a suffocated voice. 'Take it to Count Othmar.'

But the African boy had disappeared. There was no sound near her except the sound of the sea breaking on the marble steps of the landing stairs far down below.

'Take it, take it!' she said, mechanically holding the letter out to the empty air. Then she staggered a little; her eyes grew blind; she groped with her hand to feel for the trunk of the tree, and crept to it and sank down on the bench beneath it, insensible.

How long she remained there she never knew. Gardeners were near, trimming the banksia roses of a covered arcade, and below, on the edge of the sea, there were boatmen and fishermen and not fifty mètres away, in the house, in his library, Othmar was sitting, awaiting the reply to his letter. But no one knew what had befallen her. After awhile she was awakened by the touch of a sea breeze which rising rustled in the boughs and fanned her face.

When she was aroused and raised herself from her stupor, she saw the note lying before her on the ground.

CHAPTER LV.

She remembered all that it had said. She saw as though it were written in letters of fire the fact that her husband would leave her for ever if another would stoop to accept the gift of his life. She saw the terrible, inexorable humiliation of the truth that she would only owe his fidelity, his presence, and his endurance of her in the future, to the forbearance of Nadine Napraxine.

There was no place left in her mind for reason or hope to hide in; it was all a blank desolation.

The pride, which was the strongest instinct in her, and the gratitude which was the strongest motive, were all that were left

alive in the dull stupor which had overspread her brain. The one told her that every hour which Othmar spent beside her would be but as an alms cast to her by her rival; the other told her that her existence was the sole barrier between the man to whom she owed obedience, love, and fealty, and the joys which he coveted, the fate which he desired. Not alone was she herself as nothing in his life; but she was his gaoler, his burden of burdens, his one unchangeable regret and calamity. He had sought her out of mercy, generosity, kindliness; and now she was for ever in his path of life like a black shadow which hid the sunshine from his house.

She had known this, or most of this, for many months, but its cruel indignity, its dreadful truth, had never looked to her all that it looked now as she realised that pity for her unloved loneliness which made her rival relinquish her hold on her husband's life and refuse to accept the dishonoured allegiance which he offered. She saw in those few words, which had been written for Othmar's eyes alone, the finer impulses of generosity, the higher instincts of compassion, which had impelled Nadine Napraxine to remember her and to spare her when her husband had been willing to sacrifice her as the forest doe was sacrificed of old upon the altars of love. She did not blame him or hate him; she loved him always with the same loyalty, the same grateful, mute, and timid devotion. But all her life revolted in her at the thought that she would owe his enforced constancy to the intercession of the woman he adored; that she herself was nothing more, would for ever be nothing more, than as the clog of wood upon the captive's foot, keeping his steps for ever in one cheerless path. She did not reason; a stupor of horror had fallen upon her; she was only conscious of this one fact, that whilst she lived Othmar would suffer.

Inherent in her nature was the heroism of a race which had never feared death or danger, and the pride, sensitive as a nerve laid bare, which made pity intolerable, charity insult, life without self-respect unendurable. A delirium of shame was upon her. There was only alive in her one consciousness—that she would never consent to live to be a torture to him, never endure to be outstripped in generosity and in renunciation by the enemy of her life. She had loved him with all the tenderness and loyalty of her nature; she had done all she could to pay him back in gratitude and affection the immeasurable gifts she owed to him; but she had long known that she had failed, that she had no power to console or to beguile him. She was only a weariness to him, a chain upon his liberties, a companion undesired and irremovable, a thing useless and joyless, which, being lost, would be never missed and never regretted.

Nay, the gates of life closing for ever on herself would let the light of the future stream in, white and fair, across his path.

Her mind was dulled and her whole being strung to unnatural

excitation; the many months in which she had shut her unuttered sorrow in silence in her own breast had in a manner disturbed the balance of her mind. That solitude in thought and absence of sustaining sympathy, which may be as bracing as the north wind to older or sterner lives, had to her youthfulness and timid susceptibility been fatal as the north wind is to the shyly-flowering spring. She had lost all hold on proportion in her lonely grief; she had become morbidly self-absorbed, and grew in her own sight a useless and undesired burden. All which remained distinct to her were her pride, which revolted from acceptation of her rival's intercession in her favour, and the piteous sense that no devotion, no sacrifice, no effort on her part could ever make her more in her husband's existence than a weight, a weariness, a thing undesired and unloved. The unselfishness and the loftiness of her instincts now served her worse than any fault or feebleness would have done. So long as she lived, nothing, she knew, could serve him or release him. The patience and the piety which her confessor ceaselessly put before her as the eternal and unfailing panacea of woe could do nothing to give him happiness whilst she was there beside him; only her vacant place, her stiff dead limbs, her forgotten grave—these alone could be the precursors of any joy or liberty for him.

She did not reason thus, but she was moved by the knowledge of it, as one groping in the dark is guided by his touch. For the moment that sublime insanity of self-sacrifice was on her which has sent all the martyrs of the world to self-sought death.

By that which she believed divine law she knew that she was forbidden to loose the cord of life. To forestall the summons of God was to her implicit faith a guilt so dark that it would cast its shadow athwart all eternity. But as her people had flung themselves by choice upon the pikes of the revolutionists rather than outlive their king, so she was willing now to cast herself into the jaws of death rather than outlive the loss of hope, the loss of honour.

In her sight all his gifts, all his embraces, all the possessions with which he had dowered her, were but so much dishonour, being only the alms of pity and of charity, the forced atonement of a chill indifference. To live one other hour beneath his roof and by his side seemed to her, in all the dim, blind stupor of her thoughts, an indignity before which any death were blessed. She had the silent resolution and the endurance, meek yet dogged, of her Breton blood; these held her outwardly calm and restrained, while the delirium of self-sacrifice drove her headlong to her fate. She had never loved him more than she loved him at that moment. She had clearness of memory and strength of devotion enough to think, even in those terrible instants, of the only ways in which she could spare him pain. If he knew that her death was self-sought, remorse would be with him all his days.

'He shall not know; he shall not know,' she whispered to the sunny air and to the crimson blossoms.

She stooped and tore the letter of Nadine Napraxine into small pieces, and cast them down amongst the shrubs. Then with slow, unsteady steps she took the familiar paths which led through the gardens to the hills. There were no tears in her eyes; a flame-like force of self-destruction burned in her and scorched up all natural fear. Even the frightful guilt which her creed made her believe she was about to take upon her soul could not appal or arrest her. Even the human yearning in her which impelled her to turn back once and look upon his face and hear his voice—if only from some distant place, as strangers might look and hear—she had strength in her to resist and repel. Seeing him, she would betray herself; he would suspect; her death would be a burden to him as her life had been. She wished him to be happy, never to think of her save now and then with kindness.

Fortitude and self-denial were stronger in her than any other thing, and hushed down the natural revolt of aching passions.

'I will give him my life, since it is all I have to give,' she thought: she was his debtor for so much, but thus her debt would be paid.

She went slowly, but steadily, up the familiar way in the glad light of the afternoon hours. With the swift, unstudied instincts of a mind feverish and confused, but holding fast to one central and immovable idea, she had remembered at once the means by which she could reach her end and make her death seem the result of accident; she had remembered a crumbling tower on the flower-farm of her foster mother, where the owls built and the pigeons mated, and where again and again as a child she had been forbidden to risk life and limb on its rotten stairway and its ancient stones, but obstinately had sat for many an hour, seeming close to the blue sky, looking down on the olive and orange woods, and calling to the birds wheeling above her head.

One false step there—then silence. Who would ever know?

The sun was near its setting as she reached the hedge of aloes marking the boundary of S. Pharamond. She passed through them, and crossed a field or two where the red tulips were glowing beneath the tall wheat; then she reached the farm of Nicole Sandroz. No one was in sight: the man was away in the town of Villefranche, the women were at work in the rose fields. No one saw her save the old dog of the house, who gave her a mute welcome, creeping out with stiffened limbs from his niche in the wall. From the hill side on which the house stood, the turrets and terraces of Millo, the towers and woods of S. Pharamond, the green oasis of their gardens and the blue sea shining beyond, spread out before her gaze in all the glow and glory of the sunset hour. The golden light suffused all the visible world in its effulgence, and the mountains northward were violet as the cup of an anemone flower. She looked a moment: then closed her eyes

and turned away, lest the fair sight of the earth at evening should weaken and unnerve her.

She entered the dwelling-place and ascended the stairway leading to the tower, relic of an ancient time when the low white-walled building had been fortified and armed against the pirates of the sea and the freelances of the land. She climbed the broken steps of stone, which her young feet had so often trodden with the careless light tread of the kid, and its heedlessness of danger. Every now and then a narrow slit in the masonry of the tower let in the golden light of the world without and let her see the smiling sunlit fields. A strong shudder shook her at such times from head to foot, but she did not pause until she had reached the platform of the tower. It was worn and broken, many fissures yawned in it, the unused nests of birds cumbered it, the battlements which had once protected it were almost levelled with its floor, the stones which remained were loose and uneven. She paused upon the summit, and the glory of the evening light was all about her and upon her; the deep blue heavens seemed very near. Though it was daylight still there were stars clear and large above her head. The world lay soundless and serene; no echo from it reached her through those depths of air.

Her eyes dwelt upon the place of her home.

The circling pigeons flew around her, the wind of their wings fanned her cheek. She kneeled down and made the sign of the cross.

'God receive my soul!' she murmured. 'It is guilt—but there is no other way.'

Then she rose, and, with a step which never paused or faltered, she walked to the edge of the undefended roof. She looked once more southward to where the house of Othmar lay, once upward to the vault of azure air.

Then she stepped forward into the void below, threw her arms outward as a bird spreads its wings, and fell, as a stone falls through the empty air.

A little while later the women coming there, called by the howling of the old house-dog, found her lying quite dead upon the turf beneath. Death had been merciful and had not mutilated her, her face was calm and had not been bruised or wounded: her head had struck upon a stone, and she had died without any lingering pain or conscious death-throe.

The birds were flying startled and distressed above the summit of the tower. The sun had set.

Her last wish was fulfilled.

No one dreamed that her death had been sought by her own will. The loosened masonry told its tale, and no one doubted what it said. She had accomplished that supreme sacrifice which is content to be unguessed, unpitied, and, attaining to the martyr's heroism, puts aside the martyr's crown.

L'ENVOI.

In a year from that time Nadine Napraxine sat in her white boudoir in her house in Paris.

It was the eve of her marriage with Othmar. She was lying indolently amongst her white cushions; her eyes were thoughtful, her mouth was smiling.

'If one could only feel all that rapture which he feels, how charming life would be!' she mused, with her old sceptical wonder at the ardour and the follies of men.

Passion was for once acceptable to her, but it was still scarcely shared; she still surveyed and analysed its forces with a vague astonishment, a lingering derision. Love had reached her more nearly and enveloped her more warmly than she had ever believed that it would do; yet there remained beneath it the smile of her habitual raillery, the doubt of her habitual incredulity. Her life had obtained the fruition of all its desires, and the future was hers in perfect triumph, so far as any human knowledge can possess it. Yet, in the vague melancholy which floated like a little cloud at times upon her careless and amused mockery of herself, she thought more than once of the device emblazoned on the wall of Amyôt, *Nutrio et extinguo*—it is the motto of all human passions.

'Yes, this is love, no doubt,' she said to him this day; 'it is even ecstasy—as yet. But shall we never know the recoil? Shall we never tire? Will there be no reaction, no fatigue, no level lengths of habit and of tedium? Who can keep always at this height?'

'We shall—for ever!' murmured her lover, with the intensity of his adoration for her trembling on his lips. 'To doubt it is to doubt me!'

'No,' said Nadine Napraxine, with her fleeting mysterious smile. 'No; I do not doubt you at all; I only doubt myself—and human nature!'

She sighed a little, even as she smiled. She, who had divined so much more of the truth than the blunter perceptions of a man had ever suspected, she, with that melancholy presage and superstitious sadness which were dormant in her blood, thought, with a passing chill of dread:

'Our joy is like the basil plant of Isabella. It blossoms out of death!'

THE END.

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